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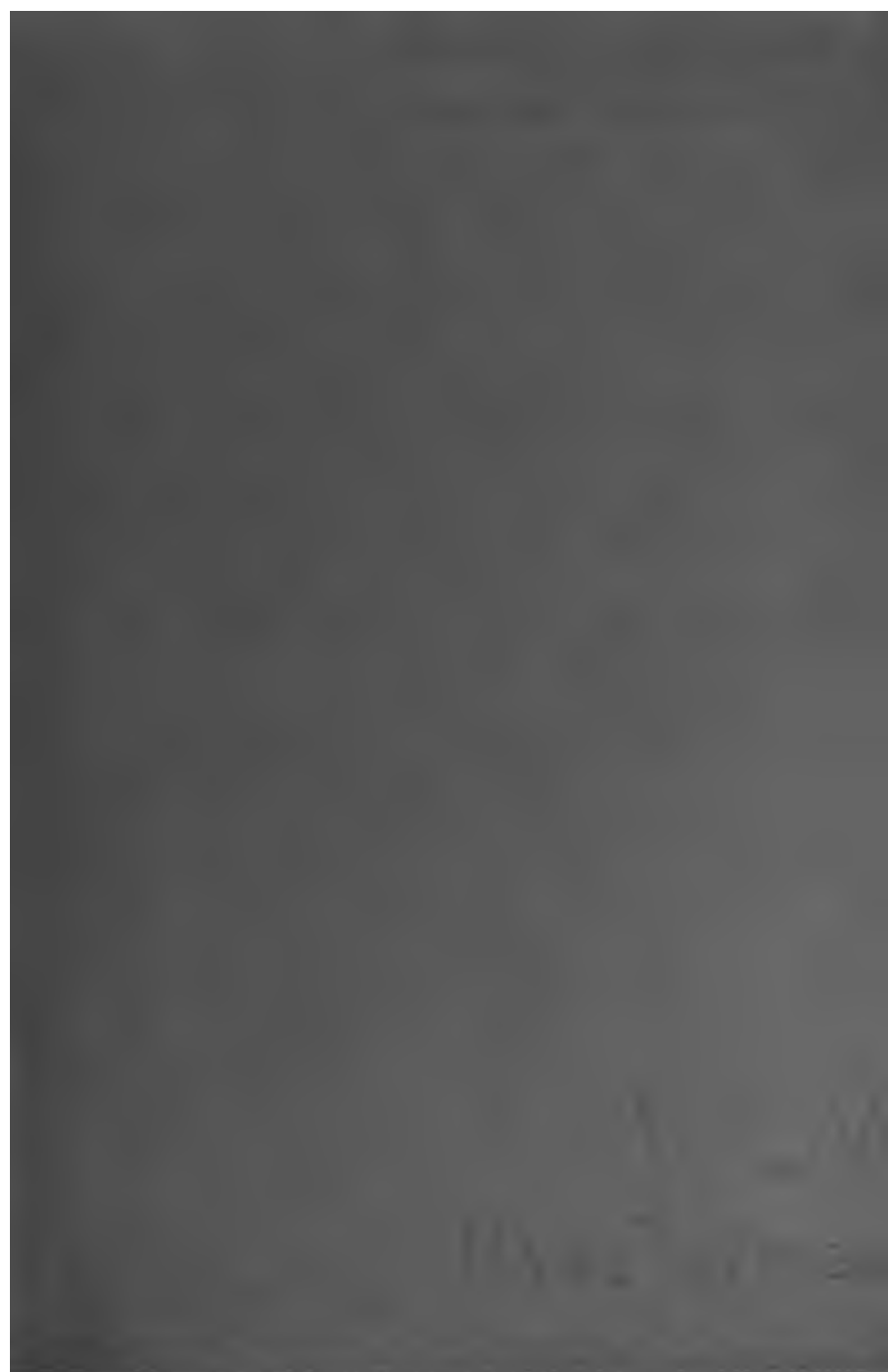
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A DEVOTED COUPLE

A Novel

BY

J. MASTERMAN

"Hand clasping hand in loyal Unity"

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A DEVOTED COUPLE

CHAPTER I

ANTICIPATION

A HOMEWARD-BOUND steamer from India was coming swiftly toward the Isle of Wight one noon of a summer's day; her passengers were grouped on her decks, with eyes fixed on the shores opening out before them. Some pointed out the well-known landmarks, the long, low, deeply indented shore—here of chalk, there of sand, lying westward—here fading off into cloudy vagueness, there standing out decidedly in some bold headland; Dorsetshire giving place to Hampshire, with Purbeck grandly reaching ahead.

What dried-up skins the majority of the travellers bore! What inert movements—signs of long sojourn in parched regions—indeed, most of them long absentees from England; and in many an eager face, and in eyes strained to discover more of the home so long unseen, might be read a pathetic history of long endurance, long suffering, long pent-up feelings of home-sickness; more than this, a wistfulness in the glad expectancy, as of an anxiety, lest the reality should fall very far short of the anticipation—would the children brought up by strangers feel the ties of nature aright? would the dead husband's family sympathize and provide? would the sweethearts be unaltered? would the long-parted wife have become too independent?

There were the sick, too, with bright eyes and wasted features, yearning for one more breath of the familiar air, one more sight of the old haunts; would they survive the fatiguing landing, the further journey? would they be reckoned an encumbrance or a joy? What volumes might be written of these poor absentees! what stormy currents lay unperceived under their ordinary appearances! "The heart knoweth its own bitterness." What could a stranger tell of its experience? But for the idea of going home again, they could not have lived through the crawling years.

When the noonday heat held them prostrate under the mocking breezes of a punka ; and when the hot, airless night prevented sleep ; when the vastness and stillness of the jungles were nearly as unbearable as the sultrier cantonments ; when the rainy season brought gloom and mouldiness to the ill-built bungalow ; when the English mail was late, and their souls were sick with dread of bad news ; and when death struck down some friend at their side—at such times the thought of going home was their only comfort, the panacea for all vexations and sorrows, as if the mere return to England would see the end of all troubles. Yet now, when the return was an accomplished fact, doubts and fears came thick and fast, even as the summer wind blew over their sensitive frames with almost too cold a freshness.

The shores of the New Forest, the great armed plateau of Hurst Castle, the Needles, like huge blocks of ivory, and the green-topped, brilliant-colored strata of Alum Bay, like Joseph's coat of many colors, were presently claiming the delighted notice of the voyagers, who excitedly hurried from side to side, recalling to each other some well-remembered point. Was ever scene more delightful—the cloudless blue of the sky, the sparkling water as blue as the sky, the many boats of all sorts and sizes moving here and there, the houses sheltering amid the wooded cliffs, the gladness of vigorous life on all around, the nearness of all dearest to them in the land becoming every instant nearer. All through their future lives would it not rise again and again before them as a picture full of mercy and blessing, overflowing with the gracious loving kindness which had brought them safely to the haven where they would be ?

A little apart from the crowd of excited men and women who stood together gayly laughing and talking were a husband and wife and two little boys. One child was held by the father, one by the mother, elevated on a big coil of rope, to bring their gaze well over the bulwarks. The little fellows were noticing everything with childish eagerness, impatiently asking, as the boats came and went, if the brothers they had never seen were aboard one of them, and imagining each steamer as it neared them must be bringing them.

"Look !" cried the father, "look, boys, look at that row of little birds with big noses sitting on the Needles ! Wouldn't you like a shy at them, eh ?"

"They were there twelve years ago. Do you remember ?" the

mother said, climbing up to bring herself on a level with her tall husband, for the wind was blowing their voices backward.

"Does they never go and get their dinners?" said the smallest boy, astonished.

The father lifted the children down. "Be off to your friends," he cried. "You are a goose, Toby."

A rush of children carried the two little fellows away, and Mrs. Vernon, clasping her warm shawl tighter round her, continued :

"Oh, the misery of that day ! I tried to count the penguins, I remember, to divert myself, but my eyes were too dim with crying."

"H-m," said the husband. "All that's over, you know, twelve years and more."

"Twelve years !" she added, pressing closer to him. "If we had known twelve years had to pass before we saw the boys again, could we have gone ?"

"And where would they have got their bread and butter if we had stayed back ?" he asked. "You know I gave you your choice of staying."

"Yes, yes ; but——"

He put his hand caressingly on her shoulder. "You did your duty, dear," he said.

"Don't call it duty," she replied, putting up her hand to clasp his. "I nearly died to leave them ; but I should have died, I think, if you had gone without me."

"I never had the smallest intention of going without you," he cried. "I was quite prepared to put the screw on if you had showed any symptoms of deserting me. Bairns are quite happy if only they are well fed and cared for ; but poor husbands droop and languish horribly out of their wives' presence."

"Virtuous darlings !" she cried, her face changing into momentary mirth ; then, going back to the all-engrossing theme, she continued, "Twelve years ! Do you think they will know us ?"

"It's very certain we shan't know them," he answered.

"Indeed I shall," she said inconsistently, "though Willy told us in his last letter his face is quite rough with hair. Oh, I can't fancy a grown-up son ; it seems only the other day he pinned my skirt to his little knickerbockers just as we started, thinking I should be obliged to take him so."

"Grown-up sons !" echoed Mr. Vernon. "You may laugh at me, but I'm positively funky of these big lads of ours. How shall I ever keep them in order ?"

"Afraid? Afraid of our boys?" And she laughed at the notion, her thin sallow face flushing into sweetness as she spoke. "No, I'm not afraid of them; but"—and she lowered her voice—"I do fear housekeeping. Everything is so changed since I was at home. How shall I know what English servants like to eat and drink?"

"Servants! Oh, I'm not afraid of them; it's the relations I dread. Now, look here: we must begin from the very beginning to keep them in their proper places."

"William! and they've been so kind to our boys."

"H-m! some of them have—for a consideration. However, one can't expect everything for nothing. But what I mean is, they must understand from the first the boys are ours, in my absence yours, and you can take care of them without their interference. You must learn to assert yourself before I go back."

"Before I go back"—the words chilled her heart. "Don't talk of that," she said; "nothing will matter when you go back. Besides"—and she laughed as she spoke—"who knows but I may elect to go back too."

"No," he said firmly, "no, that can't be; you've been too long in India as it is. Besides, I couldn't afford it; though there's only another year to put in. I must do it cheap. It wouldn't be possible to keep you as the Burra-Mem-Sahib out there and pay the boys' preposterous bills as well. This last year, Willy's crammer has cost me over two hundred pounds."

Mrs. Vernon winced. Her husband always grew eloquent over his eldest boy's deficiencies, which necessitated unheard-of charges, and resulted again and again in disappointment. Fortunately the unwelcome turn of thought was broken by some of their fellow-travellers.

"Isn't it like a scene in a play, Mrs. Vernon?" one cried, stopping and pointing to the embowered towns and villages they were passing. "How would you like quarters in that coastguard-station shelved up at the top there? It must be almost as solitary as the jungle."

"Oh, isn't it all sweetly pretty?" cried another. "What dear little toy trees! Don't the cliffs look as if cut out of cardboard? What doll-like scenery! I'm positive it's dwindled away ever so much smaller since I left it."

"Pining away for you," her husband grunted. "Or possibly your ideas have grown since I took you in charge."

"I feel as if I were at a diorama," she continued, nothing daunted. "Don't you know how the picture keeps moving on?—just like this. I really shouldn't be the least surprised to see a long wand tap that pretty hillside, and to hear a nasal voice introduce it to us."

"What rubbish you talk," said her husband. "Everyone knows England is a dreary, deadly-lively place, good for nothing but to produce——"

"What?" was asked, as he made a long pause.

"A big, thick, juicy, unsmoked, unburnt, hot mutton chop!"

There was a chorus of "Oh's!" and then the chattering group moved on and the Vernons resumed their *tête-à-tête*.

"You are sure you wrote they were *all* to come and meet us?" Mrs. Vernon said presently. "Of course we shall recognize them. No one on board expects four big boys to meet them, you know. They will be standing together—Willy, Fluffy, Georgy, and Dimple." Her voice stopped, as if her breath failed her in the ecstasy of the scene her loving eyes conjured up.

"Four hobbledehoys," her husband said. "Ankles and wrists and ears all painfully conspicuous; probably awkward and bashful too. Pray don't call them by their foolish baby names. Lads of their age can't bear allusions to their childhood."

He spoke in a matter-of-fact way to check her excitement, and was successful, for she laughed naturally as she continued in a quieter tone:

"Hobbledehoys—no! I cannot suppose their father's sons awkward and ugly."

He echoed her laugh as he replied, "Well, no, I don't think we shall see much amiss in their appearance, at all events. Let's have a look."

As he spoke he took her wrist and opened a gold medallion bracelet, wherein were tiny photographs of their living and dead children; the six living boys forming a wreath round the cherub faces of the dead baby girls.

These little daughters, long desired, had come to brighten the Indian home which had been so desolate to the parents when they returned to it after placing their sons in England. One girl had stayed long enough to run and prattle, the other had lived only from the blossoming of the geranium trees till the harvest was gathered in. They had both sickened at the same time; they both lay in the same grave, under a golden-tasselled tree, and for long

after their loss their parents' hearts found no comfort. Two more boys eventually arrived, and once again the veranda re-echoed to children's voices, and the children's establishment made a pleasant stir in the bungalow. But the memory of the baby-girls, with their more subdued cries, their softer ways, and purer beauty, was as of a never-again-to-be-experienced happiness. Even now, as they smiled proudly on their boys' likenesses, their eyes rested tenderly on the pictured treasures who had left them, and their thoughts went back longingly to the far-off grave.

But the present quickly overpowered the past. The two little boys came running up, pursued by their playfellows, and again the Vernons were surrounded by fellow-passengers, and parting words began and future plans were discussed.

There were two other couples going home, with whom the Vernons had been long acquainted. They, too, were returning to almost unknown children, and together they had often discussed the anxieties and difficulties of family ways and means. Colonel Holroyd and his wife took matters easily. They meant to enjoy themselves, they said. "Their children must make their own way in the world. They had been well educated, now they must prove their metal. They hoped the girls would marry quickly; and the boys would of course go out into the world, then *they* would enjoy themselves. No, they shouldn't worry if the boys took the reins into their own hands, and the girls chose unsatisfactory husbands; they should feel they'd done their duty by educating them and giving them fair starts. If the children chose to start off on their own hook, why, they must take the consequences."

While Mr. Marleon, a civilian, talked delightedly of growing young again among his bairns, Mrs. Marleon was a woman with hobbies. She believed she had herself educated her girls through letters, and was prepared to take all the *kudos* on herself, should they at all come up to the brilliant report given of them by their guardians.

"Beauty I don't care for," she was wont to say—"it is certainly a fatal, doubtful gift—but I do hope for urbanity of manner, cultivation, and control of temper." To which Mrs. Holroyd would emphatically declare if *her* girls were plain she would refuse to take them about. "Holroyd and I have made up our minds, if our bairns are not nice, to put them into some proper person's care, and to go and live at Dehra Doon by ourselves. It's all very well to look after them while they are children, and unable to take care of

themselves," she would add, "but there are limits; and infant paragons often become men and women exceedingly stupid and uninteresting; and I don't see we should be expected to live with people of totally opposite views merely because they are our children."

Mrs. Vernon would declare no parents ever did think their own children stupid and uninteresting; but she was called romantic, and only escaped snubbing because she was a general favorite.

"Don't go down to those boys of yours for a week or so, Vernon," Colonel Holroyd exclaimed, anxious to turn the conversation. "Let us do the theatres, and get properly rigged out by Poole. Your wife and mine must want no end of new clothes, too. Let us have high jinks together before we begin family life."

"No," Mrs. Vernon objected, "we have a house waiting for us. You forget all that—house and relations, beside all our dear boys—servants and stores, and dinner ordered too. We must hurry off to Cotleby as soon as we land."

"Well, then, we must manage to meet afterward. Our children must know each other. We might make up a party and go abroad, it would be jolly in the holidays."

"At all events," his wife added, "you will be only fifty miles from town; we can easily run over for the day; fifty miles by an English train isn't worth considering. We could be with you in time for breakfast and spend a long day."

Mrs. Marleon looked shocked. "English hospitality is very different to what is considered hospitable in India," she said; "and commissariat elephants take one about much cheaper than English railways, and with your large family, you'll find your friends at home won't be too eager to have you all for long days."

"Oh, but *we* shall!" Mrs. Vernon cried. "We shall have room enough for old friends always; besides, I'm accustomed to English housekeeping; I kept my father's house till I was married."

"Twenty years ago!" another voice broke in. "My dear Mrs. Vernon, between then and now there is a century of change." The speaker was a passenger who had been to India for mere change of scene, having neither aim nor business in life but to get through it as easily as possible. "There is no hospitality left now; everyone scrambles forward without a thought for anyone but himself and his immediate belongings—or encumbrances, as he calls his children—his idea of hospitality is an exchange of good dinners. He

pays his poor-rates, what more can his poorer brethren expect of him ? ”

“ You won’t succeed in lowering my wife’s high hopes of English life,” Mr. Vernon said, laughing.

“ Ah ! but you should face the truth,” the first speaker continued. “ England isn’t worth living in unless you’ve at least three thousand a year. Of course you’ve been away a long time, and at first every day will seem like Sunday, a day of rest and gladness, eh ? Oh ! I should like to meet some of you a year hence, when you’ll have come down to the one o’clock dinner of fids of meat, rice pudding, and squashed apples. Uh ! ”

His companions laughed.

“ Go on,” Mr. Marleon said, “ we’ve plenty of time ; croak away. For myself, I like early dinners, and I’m sure apples are not to be had all the year round ; we must have a change sometimes, perforce.”

“ Oh, I can go on, and you’ll prove the truth of every word I say. Of course, if you have ample private means, you can get about, and be able to keep a good cook ; but I don’t suppose any man has *ample* means *and* a large family—the excess is generally on the side of the family. I tell you your washing-bills alone will disturb your sleep.”

“ My dear fellow,” Colonel Holroyd interrupted, “ I mean to enjoy life on less than half the sum you name. Of course I don’t intend to keep horses ; but cabs are very convenient, and in this refreshing climate, I shall generally be too glad to walk.”

“ Oh, delightfully refreshing ! Mud up to the ankles nine days out of ten, a weak imitation of sunshine once in six weeks, paralyzing east winds from January to June, black choking fogs from October to January—delightful climate, happy people ! ”

“ At least, there’s comfort and cleanliness here above every other country in the world.”

“ Heaps of comfort, especially when one’s pipes burst, and deluge the house, so comfortable—so clean ! Coals, too, are too dear for one to afford more than one fire ; the chalk and water, politely called milk, is so delicious ; the butter made of brains and suet ; the beef, old Spanish ox ; and as for game, oh, no, not unless you are in the peerage. No, no, my dear good friends with interesting also hungry families, believe me, before the year, with its varied miseries, is well over, you will have longed hourly for the honest chapattie, the grain-fed mutton, the wild game, the long spell of

fine weather, the stingless winter, the private dhobie, and the untiring dirzee. Then, have you thought of the rates?"

"Meaning taxes?" Mr. Vernon asked.

"Well, rates *and* taxes, they are all the same; a highly respectable man calls—once a week, we'll say, to draw it mild—and if you suggest he was with you the week before, he answers so he was, but that was for some other rate, and at last you get so confused that you shell out—all in advance, of course. I once seriously thought of compounding with Government not to exceed half my income."

The speaker was asked jeeringly how he expected to have peace and safety assured without paying for it; but he went on heedless of sarcasm:

"And the houses! Won't you hate the small rooms, the draughts, the smoky chimneys! for you can do without fires only about two months in the year. You hear your next-door neighbor uncork his wine; the early sweep may mistake the chimney, and appear in your bedroom grate before you are out of bed. And, oh, more than all, how will you bear living always in one place mewed up in streets?"

"Oh, we shan't mew ourselves up; we shall often go from home, especially in the holidays."

"Hum, I think I see you in seaside lodgings full of bairns. I tell you, you'll *pine*, literally pine for the width of the jungles and the independence of camping out."

"It will be simply lovely," Mrs. Vernon cried. "Sitting on a beach again among heaps of healthy, noisy, sandy bairns."

He turned and smiled indulgently at her. "Indeed," he replied, "I do with all my heart hope you'll be as happy as you hope to be; but seriously, I am a man of moderate views and wishes, and I can only rub along decently on five thousand a year, yet I only keep one brougham and two horses, never more than four servants, for I've only a flat in London and four rooms in Paris. A small yacht—really a small one—not over two hundred tons, and then I rent a little shooting, and a box up north, of course; but I've no children, and no expensive tastes."

He stopped as he observed the expression on his hearers' faces, and when he was silent a storm of sarcasm burst upon him. Only Mrs. Vernon was silent. Surely, she thought, this prophet of evil was wrong. Had she not reigned peacefully over her father's orderly parsonage without lack of comfort and luxury, though his

means were miserably small compared to her husband's? Could she not therefore reckon upon taking the former life up again with additional means and better experience? She wanted neither town house, nor carriage, nor yachts; her boys would supply all her heart wanted, and her boys were close at hand.

CHAPTER II

REALIZATION

AMONG the crowd of people congregated at the docks to meet the homeward Indian steamer were four boys who had become objects of particular interest to the bystanders, owing to their restless movements and bright good looks. It was easy to see they were brothers and had got themselves up in their best clothes as for some great event.

Dalrymple, the youngest, was in Eton dress—spotless black jacket, waistcoat, and tie, sober gray trousers, tan gloves, and shining “topper”—a bright-eyed, well-drilled lad of fourteen. Fabian, the next elder, was in the dress of a *Britannia* cadet; he towered over all his brothers, his boyish face with pale curly hair looking absurdly childish with his broad frame and immense height. George, fifteen months his senior, was the thinnest of the four; his face had the delicacy of a girl's, though it was very handsome, with a man's beauty in form; he affected a tweed costume with wide knickerbockers and thick parti-colored stockings, rolled over under the knees, but for all his slimness and delicacy of complexion, “Vernon Secundus” was famed at school for excelling in all athletic games, and a row of cups won by his skill was set out at home ready to delight his parents' eyes; his muscles were the boast of the lower form, and believed to be rather harder than iron. When he cried, “Well done!” to one of the youngsters that youngster felt his fame was established and held his own with reassured pride. It was not yet known what profession he meant to follow, but it was popularly believed that he could succeed in anything he condescended to undertake. The first comes last in this introductory page—it may be as a *bonne bouche*—the most to be prized—“the eldest son of Chief Commissioner Vernon”—William Vernon, Esq., a handsome young man with deep gray eyes

and long dark lashes, broad shoulders, and a figure as manly as it was graceful. A sweet face which conquered the hearts alike of young and old women—men said there was nothing in him, but women saw kindness and sweetness in his smiles and “wished everyone was as nice.” “The Colonel” was his school nickname, given him at first for his military tastes in talk, continued in bitter sarcasm when he failed in several attempts to pass into the army, and kept up by his brothers because of his budding mustaches.

He had got himself up in a dark frock coat such as is affected for afternoon visiting in town, his pale gray gloves matched his pale gray tie and the delicate orchid in his button-hole, his boots of Russian leather and his low-crowned top-hat were fresh from Bond Street, and the fashionable crease down the back of his trousers showed he was particular in keeping them properly pressed. The attention of his brothers never strayed long away from him, but he took their satire very good-naturedly, and stood among them as if unconscious of their remarks, smoothing the few short hairs on his upper lip, and now and again looking longingly at the contents of an elaborately embroidered cigarette case, which he repeatedly pulled out of his breast pocket and replaced again with a sigh.

The boys’ too audible remarks, and his complacent bearing, amused some of the bystanders immensely.

“You’d best stand out of the wind,” said his tall brother, speaking with a boy’s strident voice, so that his remark was audible all round, “or you’ll get your whiskers blown into knots.”

“Let him alone,” cried the youngest; “let him enjoy them while he can; you know he’ll have to shave as soon as that commission comes.”

William took no notice, and by immediately asking a question of a passing official he cleverly left the speakers doubtful that he had heard their words.

Then the restless minds turned to something fresh. “Would father let each have a pony, or would he expect one or two to do for the lot? Would mother ride still, or would she only have a carriage? Of course she’d drive a pair.”

“Father may throw in a donkey for Bill,” said Fabian, with a chuckle. Upon which Bill spoke with great dignity, suggesting there was one in the family already.

“You are too humble,” was the quick retort, while Bill turned his back and looked at his watch, presently facing his brothers

again to hope "Father's clothes would be fit to be seen," and that the "two little beggars were not dreadfully spoilt." He also hoped there would be "late dinner and all that sort of thing, and that they did not mean to do it cheap."

Hopes and fears which had occupied their minds and tongues ever since their parents' return had been announced. What possibilities lay before these boys, whose only notion of home life for years past had been gained during holiday visits to relations! how they had dreamed of this home-coming and longed for the reunion! and now it was so near, and seemed so natural, until the vessel came in sight, and then doubts and fears possessed their careless hearts and found expression.

"Will mother have a squinny eye like that last photograph represented? will she be lemon-colored and skinny, as all Anglo-Indians are said to be? Will father be lean and gray? and the baby-boys, will they be most like their real children while they, the big boys, would seem like strangers?"

In the letters which for twelve years had never failed to come regularly, tenderness had striven to make the distant home home-like. Each little interest in the strange Indian life was graphically related, while at the same time the parents strove to realize the daily routine, and to show a keen interest in their boys' aims and doings. The father would remember his own experiences in that same school, while the mother dwelt more upon the domestic details. While the letters of the father roused his boys to unremitting perseverance, the mother's kept the young hearts from hardening among the selfishness and discord of school life. There was never what might be termed a sermon in her letters, but just a word here and there, surrounded by encouragement and cheerful reliance on her boys, that went further than pages of advice or preaching. Yet written words must fall far short of spoken ones, just as photographs, with the one fixed expression, fall short of the animated changing countenance, with its warmth and varied coloring.

Just as Mr. Vernon had felt a doubt about recognizing his sons, so the sons, when at last the steamer came alongside the quay, failed to recognize any one of the upturned faces crowded together on the decks beneath. For a few seconds a forlorn look of disappointment overcast the lads' eager countenances, till Fabian, whose height gave him the advantage over the crowd struggling around him, cried out excitedly, "There they are; come on!" and commenced forcing himself through the throng of hurrying sailors,

porters, and passengers, each and all fighting forward toward the gangway, the other brothers benefiting by his guidance till they were obliged to make a stand to avoid falling over the quay wall. There they clustered, with straining, beaming eyes fixed on the little group on the deck below them, waiting its turn to step ashore—near enough to speak the welcome that was making their pulses leap and their throats ache, yet suddenly too bashful to shout the words they had so often rehearsed to themselves.

There was the father, tall and upright, thin, brown, and grizzled just as he had described himself. There was the mother—yes, she was lemon-colored, but not squinny-eyed like that horrid photograph. There were smiles in her eyes—yearning smiles; but there were tears running down her thin face, and as the pale lips smiled they trembled, and as the brothers looked a strange new feeling of some indefinable happiness never before experienced sprang up, so that when at length she stood sobbing among them, uttering their names and patting their hands as they continued to hold her, they were as unconscious as the rest of the crowd in which they stood. The Marleons and the Holroyds came up to congratulate and bid good-by. No one had come to meet them, and as they went their way unwelcomed, they hoped they should have as much cause to be proud of their children as the Vernons had. The pessimist fellow-passenger had his “neat brougham” in waiting, but it was empty, and he knew his flat would be empty too, and as he observed the meeting between the Vernons and their boys a very unwonted feeling oppressed him. Was it possible that this work-worn civilian, with six sons to provide for, was actually more to be envied than he, the sole possessor of thousands a year for which he had not worked? and the emotion on the father’s and the brightness on the lads’ faces haunted him for many a day.

Fortunately deep emotion is of short duration, and it was a very merry party which continued the journey together to the little Midland town where the new house was prepared, and where Mr. Vernon’s mother and two sisters were living, where Mr. Vernon’s father had practised successfully as a surgeon. In the Grammar School in which the boys were being educated the father had also earned laurels, and a few miles away the mother had passed her girlhood.

It was, therefore, a return to familiar scenes for all, and both father and mother could feel keen interest in the boys’ local news.

"Granny and the aunts are sure to be waiting for you," said William ; "but I told them to keep Great-aunt Jane at home. It's such a business listening to her, and the others will be quite as much as you can do with at first."

"Shut up !" said Fabian. "As if father didn't remember her !"

"Oh, but," William continued, "you've no idea how she talks ; and she will know everything."

"Talks more than ever, eh ?" asked the father as he sat opposite his four big lads, and mentally wondered what he was going to make of them.

"Poor Aunt Jane !" the mother said softly. She, too, sat facing her elder boys, while the two little ones, sobered into silence by these strange young gentlemen, and specially impressed by the sailor boy's gold buttons, leaned closely up against her with an undefined dread that there were rivals in the camp.

"Oh, you needn't pity her," Dalrymple cried. "She's as jolly as—as—" He stopped, his mother might object to the words on his lips, but as he hesitated, she laughingly finished for him—"as a sandboy ?" she cried, guessing his feelings.

The boy blushed, and another brother broke in—they were all eager to talk—"Oh, she does, though, and she invents such a lot too, by Jove !" The exclamation dropped from his lips unintentionally. It was George's turn to blush then as he caught his mother's smiling expression, and he hurried on, but more quietly, "She declares father's a general !" It was not in the mother's heart to find a single word amiss in this first hour of reunion. She sat as in Paradise with these recovered treasures before her, and read in each radiant face, all turned on her in love, signs of goodness and intelligence.

"A general ; where did she get the notion ?" said the father.

"I wish you were a general or something," William exclaimed. "No one understands you can be a real swell when you are only mister."

"One colonel's enough in the family," George cried.

"And where do you find him ?" Mr. Vernon asked.

The three boys pointed at their eldest brother. "There he is," they cried in chorus. Then George continued alone, "We always call him 'colonel,' you know ; he's so dead on the army, passed all the exams. so finely. Why, didn't you know the C.-in-C. made him a colonel to begin with, as a small proof of his admiration."

"Ah, well !" Mrs. Vernon exclaimed, hardly liking this banter,

though its victim continued to smile serenely. "Let bygones be bygones. Your father has come to help you all, I hope."

"A fellow's no chance when he's left to women relations," William said. "But I've got a really good tip now, and if father lets me try just once more, I think——" His father interrupted him hastily. "No, no more good money shall be thrown after bad. You've had chances enough ; we must find something within your compass. Surely you've discovered you cannot be a soldier unless you enlist. You've made it pretty evident to us, at least."

He spoke sternly. It was evident even to Will that his father was disappointed and annoyed. Mrs. Vernon looked at her husband appealingly. He glanced at his suddenly sobered sons, and reflected it was early days to begin fault-finding, so with an effort he added, with a kindly nod to his eldest boy, "But we'll have a talk another time."

"I say," Fabian said to his brothers afterward, "father can cut up rough, you bet. My goodness, if he gets to hear of Annie Lightup!"

"Sh! sh!" whispered George cautiously, "give the fellow a chance; let's help him all we can, for the sooner he's out of this the better."

"He's a fool, and nothing but a fool," Fabian continued; "and a fool must take the consequences of his folly; but I'm not going to say anything, you bet." As he spoke, the object of this talk entered the room. "Here, one of you fellows," he said, "let Annie have this note. I can't go there to-night, you know—their first night at home—just chuck it over the counter and say nothing. Wait a moment," he continued, retaining the paper, as his brother's hand was stretched out for it, "how do you fellows spell 'prejudice'?"

"Not differently to anyone else," was Fabian's answer, "unless it's you. How do *you* spell it?"

William opened the note and read—"p-r-e-d-g-e-r-d-i-s?" interrogatively.

"Oh, I say," Fabian cried, "hold hard, you must alter that. I expect even Annie can make a better shot at it than that. Why do you use words you aint sure of?"

"Don't jaw," he replied; "be quick and let's hear your way. It's just as well to be correct."

"Yes," said George, "for if those *billet-doux* are ever read in a

breach-of-promise case, they'll set the court in a roar, I can tell you."

"I'd best write the blessed thing all over again," William went on, "for I'd two or three shots at it, and it's rather smeary. Here you are," he added, tossing a new copy to his brother, "cut out at the back, and don't show what you've got ; be quick back, and get ready for dinner. I suppose you'll dress, George?"

"Dress ! What do you mean ? Aint I dressed ?"

"I shall put on a white tie," William said. "Don't let mother think we know nothing. I expect she'll dress in evening costume."

"Oh, listen ! evening costume !" echoed George. "You bet, mother 'll unpack and come out in war paint to-night ! Why, she looks tired out as it is. And baby won't let Ann put him to bed ; it's likely she'll fig herself out when she's got to put baby to bed."

"Have the aunts gone ?" asked William.

"Yes, and father's walked home with them to see Great-aunt Jane. I say, I hope mother will never grow like Great-aunt Jane."

"Is it likely ?" cried George. "I'm so glad she isn't like her photograph with squinny eyes. She's sweet, that's what she is."

"So she is," William said, and then he left the room.

Mrs. Vernon was in her bedroom trying to calm the overexcited little ones, and induce them to lie quiet in the two little cribs on either side the large bed, when a knock was heard, and her eldest son, in all the glory of a new evening suit of black and white tie, entered.

His mother had put on a white dressing gown, and her abundant chestnut hair fell loosely down her back ; in the failing light of the evening she looked so much younger that he involuntarily stopped, asking hesitatingly :

"Mother ?"

"Come in, darling," she said. "What is it ?"

The tender word was as music to him ; he touched the long bright hair admiringly, as he said :

"Now I remember you, mamma ; it all comes back to me as I saw you last—the night before you left."

"Don't speak of it, my darling," she said. "Thank God that sorrow has never to be endured again. You will go away from me ; but I shall always be at home ready to receive my boys—my dear, dear boys."

"We have a real home now," said the lad. "If only I had had one always !"

Something in his tone moved her as if he would reproach her for her long absence ; but the little boys began clamoring for her notice, they only half liked the big brothers should share her attention. It delighted her then to see how her eldest born could rise out of the smallness of mind evidenced in his love of dress and appearance and show thoughtful kindness and broad unselfishness. The little hands were permitted to wander over his spotless tie and invade his pockets, the chubby heads were cuddled close to his carefully arranged hair. One after the other he soothed and charmed their petulance away, and each little tired fellow lay calmly sleeping when their father returned.

"Guess who put them to sleep?" their mother asked him.

"You, poor thing, I suppose," he said.

Then she told him.

"Oh, he's a good lad!" she exclaimed.

"No doubt of that, but I'm afraid he's finniking ; however, he's not likely to be vicious, that's one comfort. He'll not disgrace us socially if he can't add to the family honors."

"I wonder," she said presently, "if I was right in leaving them all so long—homeless."

"Eh!" he answered, looking sharply at her. "You had your own choice—them or me."

"Oh, I know it was a choice of evils, and I chose the least ; but I don't know how I left them, nevertheless." She drew him to look at the sleeping children, and added fervently, "Thank God, *they* will never have to be given up."

"Well, well," he said, "the fellows don't look as if they'd been neglected. Forget all that has gone ; we are beginning anew ; we will look forward ; we shall want clear heads to place them out in life properly. I'm sure I don't know how it's to be done."

"Of course you don't ; don't think of them as pieces on a chess-board, they'll move on of themselves."

He smiled at her tenderly, as he said :

"Only make them obey *you* from the first, or you'll have trouble when I'm gone : don't spoil them just when the novelty of our presence inclines them to show their best side."

It was a day long to be remembered by the boys, and when last thing at night, as each boy lay half asleep only conscious that the hope of years was realized, and that he was indeed at home, he was aware of his mother bending over him kissing and blessing

him, there came to him a blissful sense of rest and trust and satisfaction never experienced before.

The six o'clock bell was ringing from the Market House as it had rung every morning for centuries, to waken the bedesmen and women who lived in the buildings prepared for them by the pious founders of the Grammar School, when Mr. Vernon's voice woke his boys, and called them to hurry on their oldest things and accompany him for a swim.

"Oh, I say," William grumbled, "this is too much happiness. I hate getting up before the servants. I hate a swim, too, especially before breakfast."

"Now then, boys!" rang up impatiently.

George, who shared his eldest brother's room, had lost no time in getting into his clothes, and presented a wondrous figure to his father when he joined him. His "oldest clothes," obediently donned, left ankles and wrists uncovered, and seemed to imprison him like a vice; but the father prudently repressed the smile and joke which tempted utterance.

"Well done!" he said. "I see you know what haste means—take some tea and bread and butter, it's never safe to go out without *chota hazari*."

Tea and bread and butter at six o'clock in the morning! No wonder the new parlormaid—who seemed to have made her toilet with as much haste as her young masters—looked cross at such an unheard-of meal; but Mr. Vernon was seated at the table pouring out cups of tea, quite unconscious of doing anything out of the way—and the two little boys beside him were provided with huge slices of bread and butter, and were as wideawake as their father.

Fabian and Dalrymple soon followed; the day could not begin too early for them. Another loaf was called for, more butter too. Cook in the kitchen "supposed master knew what he was about; but," etc., etc. Then William appeared and the food soon compensated him for the early turnout; he wore a clean suit of flannels, and his smart appearance greatly pleased his little brothers.

"You don't pay your own washing-bill?" his father remarked with a laugh. "No young ladies are likely to be about—are they?"

"Are the kids coming?" Fabian asked.

"Who's going to bathe them?"

"I've going to catch crabs," said Harold, the elder of the two youngsters. "Daddy used to catch crabs in this river, he told mammy so."

"Daddy 'll swim me about," quoth the four-year-old Toby.

His brothers were ready to laugh at any small joke. The mother watched them all pass out through the little garden, the eldest boy leading the youngest, each with a towel loosely fluttering: the tall father, the six sons, their "shining morning faces," their happy voices ringing through the quiet neighborhood. As she tapped at her window and gayly waved her hand, each head was uncovered, half bashfully by the elder brothers, riotously by the little ones—there they were all before her, all together, as she had longed to see them. Not the most glowing sunshine of the glowing East had ever bathed earth and sky in such warmth and brilliancy as this cool northern sunshine. Her heart was burning with happiness, the dewdrops on the opposite fields which formed one side of the suburban road shone scarcely less brightly than her glad eyes as she watched her treasures out of sight. The lassitude and sorrows of the long years of separation, the fears and forebodings—what were they now but as a dream of the night? No wonder her prayers were fervent and protracted, no wonder housekeeping duties were forgotten, and—"Please, what is cook to do for breakfast?" was a question that made her feel guiltily unmindful of the practical present.

The bathers were hot, tired, and hungry when they came in. Eggs and bacon presented a sumptuous repast to the boys, but the father expressed disgust.

"Why don't we have fresh fish, and a fresh curry, or an omelet, and lots of fruit? Eggs and bacon! what a sickening idea!" he cried.

His wife took the blame. "It's all my fault," she said. "I ought to order breakfast overnight. I did not remember English servants don't go marketing early; it shall be different to-morrow. Do you know this cook was quite cross when I talked about fish and fruit; she said she hadn't undertaken to cook two breakfasts."

"Can't we have two cooks, then?" he replied.

"And Emily," Mrs. Vernon went on, "asked me when the dining room is to be cleaned, for if we come down before the servants, she doesn't see how the work is to be done!"

"I shall come down when I choose!" he cried; "and if these women don't like our ways, they may hook it."

The boys burst out laughing; it was curious to see how easily they were falling into the new life. Whereas the night before they had waited to be asked, and bashfully refused what they

longed for lest they should seem greedy, while the two little fellows had called out impatiently for their wants to be supplied as if feeling themselves all-important, now William helped himself, gathering courage as he found his parents took no notice; and his three brothers, after repeated nudges for dishes to be passed surreptitiously, now were emboldened to ask for what they wanted.

Mr. Vernon was expressing his pleasure that his boys could swim and take care of themselves when out of their depth. The bathing place was new since his schooltime; before there were continual accidents owing to the weeds in the river, but now part of the river was fenced in, all weeds kept down, and a constant fresh supply of water always kept to one depth. Harold and Arthur had had their first lesson—the little fellow astride his father's back, the elder held up by Fabian and George; they therefore considered themselves heroes, and chatted valiantly of their prowess.

Mr. Vernon complained of the sleepiness of the place. "Such a morning as this!" he cried, "the cream of the day, and empty streets, not half a dozen shops open; only as many fellows at the baths. The idea of sleeping in such weather! We came home up the High Street; all the same names up. I don't believe any painting's been done since I left, or cleaning either. I'd have bought some sweets if Mother Lightup's shop had been open, but only an untidy, dirty girl was flapping dead flies off the sweets with the shutters up, and only the door open. Do the boys still buy all their sweets there?" he asked, turning to Fabian, who sat next him.

Fabian nearly choked as his father thus unexpectedly addressed him. His eyes had been fixed on William, and William's cheeks were red. George replied for Fabian. "The old people are dead since your time," he said. "You know the son married and went away. Well, he came back when they died, and she's a stuck-up thing, and cheats fellows awfully."

"Surely not that girl we saw; she's not Jim Lightup's wife?"

"Oh, no," George explained, "that's his daughter, 'Miss Annie,' as her mother calls her. Wait till you see her on Sundays; why, half the chaps are in love with her!"

"My dear boy!" his mother cried.

Mr. Vernon was greatly amused. "Cupboard love!" he exclaimed.

Fortunately neither father nor mother looked at William. His appetite had failed him, and he was talking hurriedly to his little brother, who was clamoring to be shown his watch. He was seeing Annie with strangers' eyes, as he had never before seen her, and a sudden qualm came with the strangeness. Unwashed, uncombed, untidy, dirty—was it possible that was her habitual early appearance, and the trimness and neatness of noonday were altogether beside her real habit? He looked furtively at his mother in dainty fresh muslin, and recognized in the face—~~sallow and worn as it undoubtedly~~ was—something very different to the pert prettiness he had fancied superior to all other women in Annie Lightup, something sweeter and nobler and more beautiful than faultless loveliness of feature. Before this home-coming he had believed it possible to ask his mother's help to reconcile his father to an engagement with the daughter of the sweet-stuff shopman; but now he suddenly became aware of the impossibility of even hinting at it to her, and over his mental picture of Annie and Annie's mother came a horrible gaudy coloring of vulgarity and effrontery, intensified by the contrast before him.

"Then history repeats itself," the father went on. "Jim Lightup's sister was pretty, too—in a common style, of course. I never saw her beauty myself, but some of my schoolfellows were nuts on her. Harry Renton would have married her, only luckily for her he wasn't rich enough. Boys are such fools. Only think, if Renton had saddled himself with a wife like that—he holding such a splendid position as he does now—he might as well have hanged himself!"

Mrs. Vernon laughed, and nodding round at her boys, she said :

"Take warning, boys. Don't marry out of your own class. A cultivated mind lasts longer than a pretty face, and refinement with good breeding sits secure in high places."

"Jim Lightup's sister wouldn't have dared to sit at all in the high place Renton now fills," Mr. Vernon added. "And, as for her pretty face, it's gone long ago. She married a soldier for the sake of his smart coat. I saw her a year or two ago as the regiment passed through Allahabad, and she was a dirty trollop. She didn't recognize me, and I certainly didn't make myself known to her."

"I thought she ran away with an officer?" said George.

"No doubt she calls him so," his father replied. "I dare say he's a sergeant by this time ; if so, he's a non-commissioned officer."

William's attention was quite taken up by his little brother ; but every word spoken was stinging him. Fortunately for him neither father nor mother noticed the eyes made at him by his brothers, who admired "the fellow's coolness," while they despised his weakness.

"That was pleasant hearing, eh?" Dimple said to him afterward. "And Annie will be just such another trollop as papa called her aunt, you bet."

"You'd best cut the whole thing at once," George added. "There'll be a flare-up, if father finds you out."

And William hadn't a word to say. Only the night before this home-coming, he had with schoolboy ardor solemnly engaged himself to the sweetshop girl.

CHAPTER III

LOVE'S YOUNG DREAM

WHILE the summer holidays lasted the reunited family were supremely happy. Old folks flocked round—everyone showing their best side—the charm of novelty, the delight of returning health, the sense of rest and satisfaction mingled with the warm sunshine over the beautiful homeland, filled Mr. and Mrs. Vernon with profound contentment. They made for a brief season a triumphal progress as it were among relations and friends, their handsome lively boys as yet disinclined to question father's or mother's will—so many joyous companions intent only to please and obey.

Here, there, and everywhere they all went together ; now to London, then on to Brighton ; to-day, a long drive to mother's old friends the far side of the county ; to-morrow, a day's journey to father's old chum in Devonshire. Eight happy souls all travelling first class in comfortable Anglo-Indian fashion—putting up at the best hotels, seeing whatever local sights were worthy, buying souvenirs here and there, lavishly feeding servants and rewarding kindness. The big boys were in a world of undreamed-of happiness ; their little brothers took all as matters of course. They would have preferred elephants to trains, and they missed continually their much-enduring bearers ; but for the time their big

brothers were their slaves, and they were quickly learning to prefer chocolates and toffy to bazaar sweeties—so far all the brothers' tastes were in common.

Of course they made many excursions to London, where the Marleons were for the time staying in dingy lodgings, before deciding where to settle. The Marleon girls never forgot the first visit when the father and mother and four big boys came in full of sunshine. There were three Marleon girls between the ages of twelve and sixteen, all painfully self-conscious, awkward, and frightened, and when the four parents withdrew into the front drawing room, leaving the young people together—the four boys facing the three girls on opposite sides of the small back room—the silence and shyness of the young ladies was positively painful.

William recovered soonest.

"How long is it since you saw your mother?" he asked of the tallest girl.

"Five years," she replied in a whisper.

Then George accosted the middle girl with :

"Do you play tennis?"

"Yes," she answered, blushing deeply.

Then the youngest gained courage, and of her own accord, added :

"But you mustn't tell. Mamma says we're not to play any more. It's waste of time, she says."

"By George!" said Fabian.

"Cricket?"

"Yes ; but mamma says we are to stop all that. We're to go in for exams.; and all that——"

"Rot!" added Fabian.

Then Dalrymple, who had discovered they all had pretty eyes, put in his question.

"Will you be let to ride?"

All the pretty eyes grew round at this possibility. The girls sat forward, now elegantly tilting their chairs and holding their knees, all quite ready to be questioned, for these boys were evidently not the "properly conducted fellows" their mother had called them.

"I say," George continued with an expressive gesture toward the next room, "do you think you'll like them?"

The three mouths formed an O of great amazement.

"I mean," said George, "do you think you'll get on with them?"

"I say!" protested William, thinking George was going it rather strong. "Why, they're girls, you know; they'll have to lump it if they don't like it."

The three girls looked at each other, and then went off into giggles.

"Don't you like yours?" the elder asked, nodding her head also toward the front room.

"Oh, but *they* are spiffers. You don't know what spiffers they are," Dalrymple cried eagerly.

"Spiffers?" she enquired.

"Well, stunners, then—regular downright bricks," he explained.

"Why, mother's like another chum, only, oh, ever so much better!"

Then the youngest girl looked cautiously round at the closed door, and whispered emphatically, "But *she* isn't."

"Oh, you shouldn't, you know," said the sister nearest her, with a sharp nudge, while the eldest drew herself up, and frowned at the culprit.

The boys exchanged glances, and Fabian, wishing to learn more, asked, "How's *he*, then?"

"Pa," said the elder, "wouldn't be so bad if he was let—but anything's better than school."

Then the distance between the two rows of chairs grew less, and the sisterless boys and brotherless girls quickly lost all sense of strangeness, and soon knew all about each other's tastes and experiences; and mental notes were made of each other's birthdays and ages with a view to an exchange of elaborate birthday cards at the proper seasons.

Yet when the folding-doors between the room were presently opened, and the parents appeared, the awkward girls and the quiet boys seemed just as distant as before.

Mrs. Marleon had drawn up an elaborate plan for her daughters' future education, which she unfolded to Mrs. Vernon. They had all been at different schools, meeting only occasionally at holiday time, and had all been educated to suit their different talents, but either her views had not been carried out faithfully, or else the girls had failed in themselves, for she was greatly disappointed in the result.

"They are mere unformed giggling schoolgirls," she said; "no companions to me at all, no urbanity or ease of manner—their minds mere rag-bags. I heard Urania whistling this very morning—

whistling a vulgar street song. As for their music, it makes one shudder ; and the sums we have paid for it ! ”

“ You expect too much,” her husband exclaimed ; “ they are frightened of you.”

“ I took them to South Kensington for the day,” she continued. “ My dear Mrs. Vernon, they actually yawned. Titania said her back ached when I tried to interest them in the Stone Period—which is such an entrancing period, you know—and my poor little Constantia, of whom her governess reported she had the most enquiring mind of all her pupils, actually said she’d rather have something to eat than go on to study the old masters.”

Mrs. Vernon laughed. “ You wouldn’t like to be the mother of prigs,” she exclaimed. “ Don’t you think growing girls’ bodies are of as much consequence as their minds ? I am sure the one reacts on the other. Your eldest girl doesn’t look strong—and, poor things, they naturally expect holidays with you at first. What sweet eyes they have.”

“ Their mother’s eyes,” Mr. Vernon added.

Mr. Marleon clutched his friend’s arm.

“ Now, Vernon,” he cried, “ no blarney ; Sophy’s bent on turning our girls into professors. I suppose mothers know what’s best for girls, as fathers know what’s best for boys ; but for myself I don’t care for learned women, and I’m thankful to say these girls won’t need to get their living by their brains ; beside, it’s hardly fair to put them through their facings while we are all strangers together. I know I used to hate being put to torture when I came home from school.”

“ And they are so young yet,” Mrs. Vernon said ; but Mrs. Marleon refused the comfort.

“ But my dear Mrs. Vernon,” she cried, “ we had such flattering reports of their ability. Do you recollect I once showed you a photograph of Urania in an academical dress—trencher cap and all—and how proud I was of her being a graduate ? Well, I discover now it is a nonsensical fad of the principal’s and means literally nothing. One feels such a fool to be so taken in, you know ! ”

“ I have just as much right to a field marshal’s uniform as she has to that ridiculous dress,” the father added ; “ but it isn’t the girl’s fault.”

“ Well, I shall have them educated now under my own eyes, and if there is anything in them worth cultivating, it shall be made the most of ; they may grow up good-looking, and only

consider how dreadful a pretty fool is." As Mrs. Marleon said this she raised her hands and eyes as if she could utter no more lamentable suggestions.

"I know what's far worse, and that's an *ugly* fool," Mr. Vernon exclaimed, and in the laugh that followed the painful subject was dismissed.

"I don't know what she would have," Mrs. Holroyd said, discussing their mutual friends with the Vernons on another occasion. "They are healthy girls—good-looking girls, and good-tempered; but if she goes on wearing their lives out with ologies for which they've no taste, she'll make them sickly, peevish, and deceitful. They came to tea with my children yesterday, and made such a noise romping over our heads that at last we had to send up and stop them; but they must get rid of their spirits somehow, and at home they are kept sitting indoors hours at a time, while their mother examines them on their studies; she actually talks of showing up their schoolmistresses as impostors. I expect their schoolmistresses dreaded Indian mail day; she used to write pages of instructions to them. Now *I* expected failures, and I'm not disappointed. My Floss is the essence of affectation, and Fan has the temper of a fiend; but we shall make the best of them till they are grown up, and then we can go our separate ways, as I always said. How do you like your boys?"

Mrs. Vernon gasped—how did she like her boys? As if it were possible to discuss her boys—were they not a part of herself—too near and too dear to appraise as mere goods and chattels? Just as the most sacred feelings are also the most secret, so her boys were beyond discussion, as sacred and as secret as her love for her husband and her God.

Mrs. Holroyd noticed her start and read aright her dislike to the question. "I forgot you are rather peculiar on these matters," she said with a laugh; "you are quite a Cornelia about your bairns. Well, you've reason to be proud of them; but I don't mind talking about mine—just look what shrimps our boys are beside yours. Common-looking little fellows, too; still they are one's own, and it keeps up one's interest in life to have to look after them. They are so useful, too, to run errands and carry parcels; and they both are bent on going to their uncle in Australia, so we shall have them off our hands as soon as they leave school—then we shall be free to go to Dehra Doon if we like. I'm sure I'm sick of England already."

"In two months?"

"Yes, indeed ; it's so inconvenient, so crowded, and what a climate ! A narrow-minded set of people, too, leading such dull lives—half spent under umbrellas, half at the fireside, and they call this summer ! I say it's a very fine thing to be an Englishman, but one must live abroad to appreciate the honor."

There were plenty of shows left in London, though the season was almost over, and the Vernons felt they could not have too many, after their many years of absence. Sightseeing is expensive, and it was not given to them to go the cheapest way about it ; indeed, they went the dearest way to work, and as they had no carriage of their own, and commissariat elephants were as yet wanting, they hired a landau to meet them when they came up by an early train, and kept it in attendance till they left again by the late train, insisting on a fresh horse meeting them three times during the day, at stated places, that their comfort might not be destroyed by thinking their animal was overworked. The small boys were left at home, under their aunts' care, when the parents spent the day in London, and the two younger of the four brothers followed the elders in a cab, the parents driving onward in blissful ignorance of the vagaries of Fabian and Dalrymple in their wake ; who, with the wit of their kind, smiled and bowed at anyone who took their fancy, and made faces at old people or little children, who were unlikely to resent their impertinence. Once, indeed, they nearly came to grief. Fabian had skilfully arranged his feet at the window, having first chalked two grinning skulls on his boot-soles, and placed his own and Dalrymple's hat a-top, when a block ahead brought their cab close to the other carriage. A shout from George warned them in time to prevent discovery ; but the mother noticed their burning cheeks when she recognized their nearness, and was almost frightened lest they might be beginning in "some dreadful fever." George was loyal to the culprits ; indeed, his imagination improved upon theirs, and on one occasion when he managed to join them, the three rode upon the cab roof, pretending to smoke long "churchwardens," and affect to be sailors on the spree. Thus they drove up Piccadilly and Pall Mall, in the rear of the respectable landau, while William, who was fully aware of their doings, and managed to get an occasional look at them—half-amused and half-disgusted—dare not admit there was anything amiss, remembering the secret they had in their keeping respecting his own folly.

But the hot bright summer drew on to its close, the days shortened, London emptied, and, as it emptied, the amusements diminished, and the stars fled to shine in other places. Mr. and Mrs. Vernon began to tire of the train journey home after a long day of sight-seeing. Fabian went back to the *Britannia*. George and Dalrymple began school again. Harold made his first attempt at learning, under the care of a morning governess; and in the quieter home days the father tried diligently to discover in what direction his eldest boy's talents lay.

"If only he were a girl!" Mr. Vernon would say, as he watched William patiently amusing his little brother, or tastefully arranging flowers for his mother, or tidying the garden with the skill of a professed gardener. "What a charming girl he would make, to be sure." And then he would add angrily, "I'll be hanged if I can see what's to be done with the fellow!" He set him to write business letters for him at first, but the wrong spelling made him mad, and the knowledge of his anger made the young man so nervous that the mistakes multiplied. He would spell a simple word correctly, as a matter of course, and then, in dread of doing amiss, would reconsider and spoil it by the addition of an extra letter or two.

He felt his father's sarcasm and annoyance keenly, but he was never surprised into impertinence; and when they next met William would venture on some absurd remark, his handsome face clear of all signs of what had gone before, and surprise his father into a hearty laugh, and a quick return to the usual cheerful kindly intercourse.

"O Billy," said his father one day, after a stormy scene in his writing room, "you would make a famous fool for a circus—*that's* your line." But he sighed as he said it, and the sigh was harder to bear than the hardest words his father had ever hurled at him.

His mother did her best to help. She would patiently try to train his ears to the sound of words, would hear him repeat whole columns of spelling, would give him dictations, and finding the same faults time after time, would weary herself with repetitions, but all to no purpose. With a joke he would chase away the lines on her brow, and turn her tender entreaties into laughter. She was very prone to find fun in those early days of recovered home; the long years of anxiety and separation had reacted on *her naturally happy disposition*. The servants would hear sudden

bangs of doors, rushings upstairs, stifled laughter, and boyish shouts, and "Listen to missis at her games!" Indeed, the atmosphere of healthy youthful fun around her was as a tonic, and, under its influence, roundness and brightness were returning to her thin, sallow face.

She would sometimes drop panting for breath into a chair after one of these breathless scampers up and down the house, pursued or pursuing, and wonder was she the same person who had suffered sorrow and pain in loneliness and stillness in the solitary camp in the jungles, or the closely shut up bungalow during her husband's office hours? Could she ever murmur again after the love shown in bringing her to this overflowing happiness? The cries of "Mother" ringing up through the house, as the boys came in from school, were as the music of the spheres to her delighted ears; to meet her boys in the town in that short twenty minutes allowed them during the morning lessons was a never-failing treat to her, though she had breakfasted with them, and would have them round her again at midday. To be from home when they came in to tea *must* not be. "Ah, well," friends would say when trying to keep her to tea with them, "you'll soon have had enough of this schoolboy companionship." But though she never tried to convince them otherwise, she knew in her heart that she was never so truly at rest as when among these noisy loving schoolboys. Their friends were her friends too, and were welcomed whenever a holiday permitted an afternoon gathering. "Vernon's mater" soon became a popular character. She was vociferously voted to be "a regular good 'un," and her appearance in the cricket-field was looked for as an incentive to double energy in the games. The big boys were sure she had been "sweetly pretty," and the little boys whose parents lived at a distance soon learned to come to her for comfort and advice in difficulties.

"I should have thought your own boys gave you plenty to do," her husband said one day, finding her decorating the running-suits of some companions of Dalrymple's.

"Their cross old matron wouldn't help the poor fellows a bit," she replied; "so of course they knew I would do it. Think how often someone has done it for our boys."

Mr. Vernon poohed and grumbled and then came to her and kissed her. "I shall be afraid to leave you in sole charge," he said. "You'll be feeding and clothing half the school, when I'm not here to check you. I wonder what the girls think of it all!"

The girls were his two elderly sisters.

"The girls are too sensible and kind to interfere," was her answer. "They are patterns of sisters-in-law, always ready to be kind, never to be officious ; but they are your sisters, dear."

"Great-aunt Jane is quite right ; she says you can turn me round your little finger," he rejoined. "Shan't I enjoy my liberty when I get it !" As he spoke standing in the doorway, looking back at her, she jumped up and would have kissed him, but for the unlooked for entrance of William. As the young man's eyes showed his sense of the little scene, his parents suddenly drew apart—a flush on both faces—embarrassed as are young couples in their courting days ; the appearance of a grown-up son when the parents were still flirting with each other was of necessity an anomalous situation. Doubtless William was privately amused. All he said was, "Father, Aunt Issy wants you to go there ; great-aunt says she won't take her medicine unless you give it her. She declares you promised you'd go over twice a day and pour it out for her."

"I wonder what she'll imagine next. But I'll go."

Great-aunt Jane was one of those unhappy people who seem to live entirely to teach patience and forbearance in, not to, others. She had taken charge of Mr. Vernon's father in his babyhood, had scolded him through all his childhood and youth, had saddled herself upon him in his manhood, and now, having long survived him, she continued to be an Old Man of the Mountain to his children. It was a dim legend in the family that she had refused to marry for the sake of her brother's orphan ; and, if that was so, the orphan had amply compensated her by his unwearied care. All she possessed was a pension of forty pounds a year, which had been allowed to accumulate ever since her nephew could afford to maintain her. Her great-nephew considered her to have a like sacred claim upon him after his father's death, and she lived on in the old house with her three nieces, her self-assertion increasing with her years, which at this time were nearly ninety.

"What's up now, mother ?" Mr. Vernon asked, as he entered the house in the High Street, the door of which still bore the brass plate with his father's name on it, though the lettering was almost indistinct through the rubbing of half a century.

His mother was still a pretty woman, though her son was an elderly man ; her manner was very sprightly, and her dress very becoming. "She wanted repose and dignity," Aunt Jane had said

of her when she came home as a bride; but Mrs. Vernon's sprightliness and gayety of heart were all wanted in daily and hourly companionship with her husband's aunt. But for her bright temperament, she would have become a nonentity in her own house—a slave to the selfish and exacting elder lady. She never thwarted or openly contradicted her. She, too, believed Aunt Jane had been as a mother to her nephew; but she went her own way, held her tongue, and carried her point—refusing to hear or perceive the antagonism ever at work. She was having her reward now in her old age, for Great-aunt Jane rarely ventured out of her own rooms in a wing overlooking the garden, and was quite unable to make the former forays into the kitchen and the larder, disputing with the servants and scolding the girls. "For papa's sake," her comfort was considered paramount in the family, and had she been the most lovable of her sex, she could not have been more carefully watched and tended.

"Is that young William?" was heard in a shrill, cracked voice as the front door closed on Mr. Vernon's entrance. "How long is he going to keep me waiting for my medicine?"

The mother and son exchanged a grimace, and with a laugh the son darted up the short flight of steps leading to the aunt's rooms. Great-aunt Jane was seated in a room overlooking the pleasant, old-fashioned garden, at a table on which writing materials, the daily paper, the Bible, a box of biscuits, a work basket, and two of her most favorite books—Martin Tupper's *Poems*, and "Enquire Within," were placed within her reach. Everything round her was bright and spotlessly clean; a stand of gay flowers, in pots, filled one of the two windows, but there were no vases of flowers, they were a modern fashion; to her thinking, china ornaments were preferable to "messy, sloppy things which were always dying." She was dressed in a fashion of her own, but a fashion pre-eminently suited to her mummylike skin. Her silk gown opened over a kerchief of soft white net, which was pinned at the throat with a small diamond brooch—her mother had worn it on a band across her forehead—a larger brooch of the same pattern closed the V-shaped opening of her bodice, and a trimming of beautiful old lace went round and down the sides of the V, and edged the wrists of her voluminous *gigot* sleeves. She wore a huge white cap, very much trimmed with white gauze ribbon, spotted with violet, over a curled front of false hair—such as she had worn for the last fifty years; her eyes, though sunken, were bright, and needed no

glasses to aid their sight. As she recognized her great-nephew's voice below, she had hastily pulled from her pocket five or six curiously set old-fashioned rings, with which she hastily bedecked her clawlike fingers, and she was still settling a double row of beautiful even teeth when he entered her presence.

"Young William!" she exclaimed, as soon as she could speak, "I've been waiting for my medicine nearly half an hour. What would your soldiers say if you kept them waiting on parade like this? A general should practise punctuality in his own family; then it comes natural to him."

Mr. Vernon took up the medicine bottle and gravely poured out the proper quantity.

"You may as well dub me commander-in-chief, while you are about it," he said.

She drank the dose and ate a large acid drop after it.

"Sit down, then," she said, "and tell me all about it. Well, I *am* glad they've recognized your services properly at last—so absurd to insist on keeping you a 'mister,' wasn't it? Well, now, if I were you, I should get Willy on the staff, and make him your aide-de-camp. I remember my dear father being made aide-de-camp to Wellesley or Cromwell, I'm not sure which, it is so very long ago. Why, think of the pension—where should I have been without it? Make Willy your aide-de-camp at once, young William."

"I'm a civilian," he cried, glad no one was there to tempt him to unseemly mirth; "and things are different now."

"Call things what you will," she continued, "but depend upon it, your duty is to push yourself to the front. God helps those who help themselves. I should like to know why that pretty boy shouldn't be helped by his own father? We all *must* help one another. Where would your father have been without me?"

He never argued with this old, old woman now. Formerly he had resisted her authority, and done his utmost to incite his mother and sisters to hold their own against her; but her dark wrinkled skin, her feeble movements, and her strange mingling of past and present appealed to his manliness, so he humored and petted her as his father had done before him.

Something in his kindly smile recalled the dead to her. "You grow very like your father," she said as he rose to go. "Ah, *he was* a man! If he'd lived, he might have reached the top of his profession; he could have moved to London and become physician

to the queen." Sinking her voice, she added, "I don't think much of Dr. Pritchard. He'd never have made his way here but for your father's good will—a poor, creepy, crawly sort of creature. But if Gertrude had married him——"

He smiled and said, "You are a match-maker."

"Not I. How is missy?"

He could not bear to hear his wife thus designated.

She knew it, and laughed as she added :

"She'll always be missy to me. Such a girl, to be sure, to have grown-up sons!"

He joined his mother and sisters in the drawing room, where they were at luncheon. The younger women got up and kissed him, he submitting to be kissed, as middle-aged brothers invariably do, without any attempt to return it. Gertrude, the elder, was the widow of a clergyman once curate in the town. She had been widowed after a marriage of barely ten months. The day her husband was buried a baby boy was born, and for three years she was almost happy and comforted; then the child died, too, and after his death she gave up her little house, furnished with such glee by herself and her lover before they were married, and went back to the old home, and but that she was called Mrs. Lancing, instead of Miss Gertrude, she fell back into the old ways and interests, and those three years of independence were as if they had not been—to others, at least.

Isoline was three years her junior. She, too, had been a pretty girl, a round, smiling, roguish girl; but now she looked more than her forty years, and into the roguish eyes had crept a plaintive yearning look, over which her light-hearted mother privately fretted. Gertrude's happiness was in the past, her sister's was continually flitting before her. Twenty-three years ago she had engaged herself to a curate. Seventeen can afford to wait, but time never waits; so time went remorselessly onward, stealing away the years, and with them the hopes of the penniless parson. A college living was given him at last, but it was not worth having, and the damp from the river which ran through the vicarage garden would soon have crippled him had he stayed there. He was a scholar, a good man, and a thorough gentleman, but he could not preach the excellent sermons he composed, and a certain bashfulness of manner kept him ever in the background. Even Isoline trembled when he preached, and tried hard to make him self-conceited. Then he determined to go as a missionary to Burmah, and

then her family interposed. If Isoline chose to go there against their wishes she must go penniless, and her great love could not add such a burthen to him. So he went away without her, and both clung to the other's faith, and looked forward to meeting again.

He had found his work, he presently wrote, and was happy in it—as happy as he could be apart from her. A little more patient waiting, and then they would meet again. But she was forty, and he was still in Burmah. What reams of tender confidences came and went between them all those waiting years! Meantime she had worked among the poor, and kept up her music and drawing and French and German with the fervor of a girl. It should never be said she had lost all her accomplishments when he returned to marry her. His friends must never be able to say she was a poor, faded, stupid old maid.

So far the sisters had by no means been as fortunate as their brother; and yet every lot has its compensations if one would but seek them, instead of only looking for the troubles. Gertrude and Isoline and their cheery mother had many compensations—especially since Great-aunt Jane kept to her own rooms, and time which flows evenly also flows swiftly.

"Is it true," Mr. Vernon asked, as he seated himself to share their midday meal, "is it true you might have been Mrs. Pritchard, Gerty, helping to send out pills and interviewing measly babies?"

"William! that's Great-aunt Jane's nonsense, I'm sure. As if—why, just think, Leonard would have been older than your Willy—a great, long-legged fellow. I don't think he'd have liked to help to make up medicine any better than I should."

"How *do* you know Leonard would have had long legs? He might have been a dwarf."

Gertrude looked at him indignantly.

"Have you forgotten his father, then?" she cried; "he was six foot and over, and *his* father was six foot four; and I suppose you know our father was six foot one; and I hope you can see I am a tall woman! Of course Leonard must have been tall. Besides, when a child is three years old, he's half the height he will be when grown up, isn't he? Leonard was three feet and three inches when he died. Why, he would be six foot six now."

"Very convincing," said her brother.

"He's better off now," said her mother.

"He was a beauty," said Isoline gently.

"I should have sent him to his father's college," Gertrude continued. "He would very likely have become senior wrangler—such a mathematical head, to be sure. How pleased the Lancings would have been, and your boys would have had such a good example, wouldn't they?"

"Oh, well, there's no limit to some imaginations," her brother said. "Here, Gerty, cut me some cake, it's more to the purpose. And you haven't answered my question. Why didn't you make poor Pritchard happy? I thought he was a good deal thinner than he used to be. I understand why now."

Mrs. Lancing burst out laughing. "There's one reason against him," she cried presently. "I'm a head taller than he is; isn't that sufficient?"

"A woman's reason—worth nothing."

"Well, next, he eats curry with a knife and fork."

"You could teach him better."

"Did you ever see him run?" Gertrude continued; "and have you forgotten what a boy he was?"

"Always knocking things over," added Isoline, "and then calmly saying, 'It was quite an accident.' Oh, I shall never forget him at our birthday parties; poor papa used to say he'd like to kick him; and then to think he should settle down in papa's practice!"

"He's a clever, sensible, worthy man," said Mr. Vernon, with his face bright with recollections of the awkward boy; "but of course a prophet is never a prophet at home."

Mrs. Lancing rose. "Unprofitable talk," she cried. "I must be off to hear Mr. Doughty read his sermon, or he'll make a muddle on Sunday night."

"What! are you still the curate's coach?" her brother asked her.

Gertrude ran off, and Isoline answered for her. "Every curate who comes is her special charge, for poor Lancing's sake, I suppose. This present curate is quite a duffer, but she's improving him; he can't wake early, and she gives old Duffy—you remember old Duffy the bellman?—orders to throw gravel at his window. When Duffy was ill, she used to go to pull a string that dangled from Mr. Doughty's window, of which the other end was tied round his ankle. The rector shouted when he heard of it."

"I wonder none of your boys wish to be doctors," his mother said. "I should have liked the old name to be carried on in the old home."

"George and Dal haven't made up their minds what to be yet," he replied. "George would make a fine soldier, and I fear he has an attraction for the service ; but it's poor pay for the majority."

"He'll do well, whatever he goes in for," Mrs. Vernon said ; "but he'll have to go to college, if he gets a scholarship, which he's safe to get, I'm told."

"So I'm told ; but he need not accept it—perhaps he won't ; but Dal may wish to be a doctor, yet—he's too young to know his own mind. Then there are the little fellows, they may both feel a call to the lancet, eh ?"

"And darling Billy," Mrs. Vernon said. "I wish he'd make up his mind ; he told me you won't give him another chance for the army. Haven't you influence in India to get him into something ?"

"My dear mother, I can't go through an examination for him, and there's nothing that I know of worth having without an examination first ; the fellow is sharp enough, but he can't spell better than an infant. I heard his mother dictate 'scandalize' to him only yesterday, and he spelt it 's-k-a-n-d-e-r-l-y-s' ! Who'd employ such a numskull ?"

"But ~~he~~ must do something !"

"I'm sure I don't know what. He couldn't earn much as a barber's block, or a tailor's dummy, and I don't know what else he's fit for, unless it's a clown."

The poor father always wrought himself up when his eldest son was the topic. His mother knew it was a painful subject, and was vexed with herself for having begun it.

"Give me the *old* cherry brandy, Isoline," she said ; and her son accepted the sop, and became cheerful once more.

CHAPTER IV

SKELETONS

A DAY early in November : the rain came down with uninterrupted lashings, the wind in gusts caught the violent drops and hurled them against the dripping windows, falling for a moment as if ashamed of its fury, to rise again with mad force as if it would uproot the trees which bent almost double before it. The streets

were strewn with yellow leaves, the dreary remains of autumn's brilliant painting; the Grammar-school boys passing "up street" on their homeward way, dragged their coat-collars over their chilled ears and slunk under the eaves in vain attempt to shelter themselves from the storm. Even to them, brought up to face the extreme of cold and wet, this afternoon was trying and depressing to their spirits. Those who had pocket money stopped at Lightup's shop to comfort themselves with peppermint cushions or chocolate creams; those who had none also stopped for a second, too, but only to flatten their noses against the outside blurred panes in envious admiration of the delicacies inside.

Among the moneyed youths was George Vernon, who gave the magnificent order of "two pennyworth of 'Delicious Varieties,'" and requested they might be made into two separate parcels.

Among the moneyless youths was Dimple Vernon, who eagerly watched his brother's purchase till he saw the two little packets handed over, when he at once turned to pursue his way, saying to a companion, "He's spent it on the kids. It's no use waiting, a ha'porth each would have done, and if he'd bought four big peppermints with the other penny, he could have given a chap one; it's too bad, I swear. I aint envious; but he overdoes it."

Thus bewailing, Dimple took to his heels, to have the pleasure of telling the kids what was in store for them, while George stood nervously waiting till Annie Lightup should dismiss him. First she made some smiling remark about his generosity to his little brothers, for she guessed where the little parcels were going; then she gave her opinion on certain school matters—Lightup's shop having been a debating ground for many generations—speaking of the boys as "*young* Smith," "*young* Jones," and making free use of her bright dark eyes on her audience by turn. Mrs. Lightup sat by knitting, occasionally putting in a pert word, and laughing affectedly at the schoolboy witticisms.

George did not share William's admiration for Annie; behind her back he called her "stuck up," and a "conceited cad," but to her face he only said "yes" and "no" to her remarks, changing his feet impatiently as he stood among his schoolfellows.

But George was too big and too handsome for Annie not to wish to enchant him as she enchanted his brother and many of the biggest boys, and the day was too dull to allow her to let customers go too quickly.

"You young gentlemen must have begun to save up for Christmas already!" she cried, tossing her head in a manner she believed to be the manner of professional beauties. "There's no taking any money over the counter nowadays, is there, mater? Mr. George, I hoped we should have had your ma's custom. Couldn't you speak a good word for us?"

George colored, well remembering his mother's dislike to the look of the Lightups' pastry.

"We've got a cook, you know," he said lamely; "and she makes our pies and things."

Annie burst out laughing.

"Oh, Mr. George!" she cried, "you are so funny, you are. Of course you've got a cook; but most genteel families buy their pastry at shops when they receive company."

"We never do receive company," said George savagely. "How can we give parties, with all of us and the kids about? I say, you chaps, how much longer are you going to loaf on here?"

"One word, Mr. George," Annie asked, drawing him to the further end of the shop. "Don't look cross at poor little me. When is W—— Mr. William coming back? He went off without coming to say good-by."

"Oh, you know he's only gone for two or three days," said George, half taken in by the entreating expression the girl's face had assumed. "He'll be back on Saturday, I dare say. And," he added, thinking it would be wise to try to stop her nonsense, "I dare say he's having a jolly flirtation up in town."

"Mr. George!" said she, raising her left hand, which was adorned with a huge gypsy ring, "don't you know what this is?"

"A thundering big ring," said he.

"My ring—his ring—our ring!" she exclaimed with affected emphasis. "It aint likely he'd *flirt*, is it?"

"Oh, rubbish!" cried George, fairly staggered by the knowledge of his brother's crowning folly. "A fellow like Will can't get engaged, you know; it isn't lawful, you know. Besides, perhaps he'll get something to do in India. It's no use Will thinking of a wife till—oh, till he's white-headed, I dare say."

"To India!" she repeated, clasping her hands in ecstasy. "To India! where I have always *longed* to go; the home of chivalry and romance! I have always longed to see moonshees and pagodas by moonlight. And now—I shall go, with——"

"Oh, I say!" cried George, in terror of being overheard by his

schoolfellows, who were already looking curiously at the *tête-à-tête*. "Stop this, and let me go."

"Very well," she said, raising her voice so as to be heard by everyone, and going back to her former post behind the central counter, "I'll tell pater which sweets you want, and he'll be sure to get them down." After which little trick, which she supposed to be a clever way of disarming suspicion, Miss Annie Lightup dismissed her admirers. George went blundering on through pools of water, bending his tall figure, and regardless of other foot passengers, till a familiar voice made him look up. It was his father clothed in waterproof.

"Holloa!" cried Mr. Vernon, who had tilted his umbrella against his son without recognizing him. "Oh, it's you, George—and without coat or umbrella. What are you about, sir?"

"It was fine when I left home, sir."

"Fine! Don't you know this detestable climate yet—to give it credit for being fine half an hour together? Never leave your coat at home again; it's tempting Providence. There, don't stand up to your ankles in water; go along and change every shred about you. Of all the horrible, gloomy—" The remainder was lost as Mr. Vernon proceeded, and George took to his heels.

The father had stayed indoors till late in the afternoon, hoping the storm would lessen. He had written his letters, read his paper, and looked over his accounts—still the wind and the rain went on untiringly. Then he began to think of India, and to wish himself back in its sunshine. How small his present house seemed—how badly built; a cold blast blew in through the windows, though they were fastened, and under the door, though it was bordered with felt; while periodically a draught descended through the chimney and sent a stream of black smoke through the room; the noisy doings of his neighbors were annoyingly distinct; his cook seemed to spend her time in raking the kitchen stove, while his little boys divided theirs in leap-frog in the room just over his head, and in noisy races down the stairs. What would he not give for the calm of his district camp life or the large bungalow in cantonments, with its deep vast verandas, and its silent, obsequious attendants? When a man gets dull, he invariably becomes troubled about his finances; and on this dull, damp, cheerless afternoon Mr. Vernon troubled his mind about educational expenses. He opened a drawer, and gloomed over a certain file of papers which was docketed "William's Crammer," and as he looked them

over he declared to himself he had been horridly swindled ; nay, more, he had been a fool to suppose any human power could supply brains where no brains existed—and he had long made up his mind that his eldest born's head was destitute of any. Still, as he pondered upon the uselessness of all this expenditure, he remembered many quick remarks, many unselfish acts, many ready notions this brainless son had shown, and the handsome careless face, the musical voice, and happy laugh rose before him as if to deprecate the father's scathing criticism.

"He must be fit for something," he said, replacing the long bundle of heavy bills ; "but I'll be hanged if I know what."

Then he thought of his own career at William's age. Out alone at one of the least important and hottest stations in Bengal, spending his days in a court whereof the want of ventilation was so great even native clerks were often carried out almost stifled, saving half his pay by dint of the strictest self-denial, and all for the chance of going home rich enough to ask Amy Lavender to be his wife. Then the father thought what a pity there was no Amy Lavender to stir up William to exert himself. "But I doubt whether he'll ever care for anyone but himself," was his concluding thought ; "at least not enough to make him learn to spell."

A fresh gust of wind and rain almost brought the window in, and sent a cloud of soot out into the room. He opened his door and shouted, "Amy," and his wife darted downstairs and asked in alarm what was amiss. He poured forth a stream of invectives against builders who were not worth their salt, and a municipality which didn't know its duties, and "a Government which did nothing," and "a pack of fools who suffered themselves to be so imposed on." And between his angry words he puffed the blacks off his papers and banged at the fire to make it burn clear, and rattled at the door handle to show the lock did not fit ; while she stood silently looking and listening, letting him talk himself quiet without interference. A wise woman ! At length his last anathemas came.

"I'll have the whole house overhauled before I leave ; every window and door shall be rehung and properly fitted, every chimney shall be raised, and all the floorings and skirting-boards put down afresh. I'll have workmen down from town—none of these intimidated imbeciles ; and I'll cut the cost out of the rent. I do hope you are satisfied that England isn't fit to live in ?"

She didn't even smile, though his anger was very ludicrous ;

merely argued that the gale was southwesterly, and it was next to impossible to keep such gales at bay.

"Surely," she argued, "it is more bearable than a scorching wind laden with sand and horrible insects?"

But he wouldn't have it so, and then he reminded her of the prophetic words of their fellow-traveller: "Long before the first year is out, you'll *long* for the largeness, and freedom, and quiet, and sunshine of India."

"This is an exceptionally dreary day," she said, declining to argue. "Let us go and see your mother and the girls; a scamper through the rain will be a new sensation."

"You certainly must not go out. It is fine enough for one, but not for two, as Sydney Smith said to the old maid who wanted to go out with him."

He was rapidly recovering the serenity which rarely failed him in her presence, and laughed at the old joke as he pulled on some thick boots and rolled up his trousers.

"Oh, but," she added, "your father used to recommend every-one of every age to go out as usual, however bad the weather, if only they changed as soon as they came in."

"Ah, yes; but he didn't mean old ladies who spent twelve years on a stretch in India; at all events, his son won't have *you* follow his advice, so help me on with my regulation and stay with your bairns at home; you know you are far happiest with them." He held her at arm's length critically inspecting her, then he added, "But I'll not abuse the climate, for your sake; there is hardly a trace left of that sallow little scarecrow who went on board with me at Bombay."

"Nor of that grim, lean, lemon-colored sahib who went on board with me!" she retorted; and then she had let him out and been blown almost breathless before she was able to shut the front door upon him.

After meeting George, he went on till he was close to the sweet-shop, now lighted up and looking, by contrast to the dark, flooded streets, doubly inviting to the numerous boys still clustered at its steamy window.

Mr. Vernon's eyes fell on some peppermint cushions, pink and white, and as he recognized the almost forgotten dainties which had been dear to his own childish taste, he remembered his great-aunt had formerly liked them, and obeying the double desire to buy some for her, and to find himself once more inside the well-

remembered shop, he entered and asked for some. Only Annie was behind the counter, and she was talking to two or three big lads who fell away outside before the new-comer could recognize them. It was impossible for him not to notice the sudden nervousness evinced by the smartly dressed girl who reminded him of her aunt, who in her youth had stood as she stood dispensing smiles and sweets behind the self-same counter.

"Yes, Mr. Vernon, sir," she repeated again and again, as he made some good-natured remarks, amused to see how "history repeats itself."

He took notice of the little affectations, the accentuated copies of the class above her, the cheap fashion of her dress, the caricatured hair, the big ring on the left hand, the jingling dozen of tinsel bangles on her wrist, the colored pocket-handkerchief stuck in the bodice ; how little she guessed how cheaply he appraised her, wondering how lads with sweet, modest mothers and sisters could see any charm in this foolish, dressed-out doll.

As he put his parcel in his pocket and turned to go, Mr. Lightup came out of the back parlor, and obsequiously addressed him, saying :

"May I have a word with you, sir? I'd like to welcome you home, sir, seeing as we were lads together, sir."

Mr. Vernon turned quickly and faced him ; he had only general memories of him, as one of the boys of the modern half of the Grammar School. In those days the school was attended by the townsmen's sons, as a matter of course, but there was always a broad line drawn between them and the sons of the gentlemen who settled there entirely to educate their sons cheaply. Whether the pious founder ever intended his charity to be so applied remains a vexed question to this day. The broad-set, under-sized tradesman in his shirt-sleeves bore little resemblance to the slim little lad of long ago ; but Mr. Vernon answered him with the cordiality due to an old schoolfellow, and referred to old days and scenes of mutual interest.

Jim Lightup, with his shirt-sleeves rolled above his elbows, stood with arms akimbo beaming up at the gray-headed man who had made himself a position and a name which shed reflected glory on his old school.

"I've seen ye in church, sir," he said ; "but of course I couldn't make so bold as to make myself known to you in public anywheres. When you was here last, the old folks were here still, and I were

foreman at a sweet-shop in London. Of course the name's worth something, it's been stuck up here so long ; so I came away here when father dropped off, and we get along as well as we can. And you, sir? I'm sure we're all proud of you. You might be made mayor, sir, any day, if so be you make up your mind to stop among us."

"I have another year's service in India," Mr. Vernon said, slightly smiling at the mention of the possible dignity. "But I shall leave hostages for my return."

"Ah, them handsome young gentlemen! Well, there's nigh upon six hundred lads in these schools, but your young gentlemen take the shine out of 'em all, I says. Look at Mr. William, now. Why, he's fit to visit the Lord Mayor of London any day, he's so genteel. And Mr. George! I split my sides a-larfin' to see him taking the fast balls at cricket. You'd catch a weasel asleep sooner than you'd catch Mr. George napping at the wickets."

"And how many children have you?" Mr. Vernon asked, wishing to return a little kindly interest.

"Oh, ne'er a one but Hannie here, and she's enough for us, for what with her piano-forty and her frills and ribbons, it's as much as we can do. She favors my sister Poll, don't you think, sir? her that used to serve here in your young days."

"A little. She's married and gone abroad, I think?"

"Well, that's true, she's married and gone abroad. She was always a one for show, you know, sir. It wasn't the man, sir, it was his clothes she fell in love with—poor foolish girl! She could have had 'most anybody in reason. You remember, sir, there was a gentleman's son come back long after he'd left school, and would have married her; but there was a chap home on furlough with a red coat—a colored sergeant, he called himself, but he was a white man, sir, all the same—and off she went, against poor father and all. She writes once in a few years. He's an officer now, she says; but she was always one for laying it on thick, and I expect he's only a non-com. Well, sir, now may I ask you, and no offence, are you to be Commander-in-Chief when you return to India?"

Mr. Vernon laughed.

"Hardly!" he repeated. "I'm a civilian, Lightup; plain 'Mr.,' you know."

"Well, sir, that's what I thought, and I know Indian civilians are just kings in their provinces. I've not forgot all my reading

at school. But Mrs. Smith—her that's old Miss Jane Vernon's maid—she told my missis that you'd told her missis that you were Commander-in-Chief. I said, 'Miss Jane Vernon is a lady of great age, she may have misunderstood ; but of course she ought to know best.' You'll excuse the question, I know, sir ; not that we could be prouder of you than we are, but we would like you to have your proper title, sir."

Mr. Vernon nodded and turned to go. Lightup accompanied him to the door.

"One word, sir," he said, sinking his voice, that no one should overhear. "Do you know your step-brother's here?"

The umbrella Mr. Vernon was about to open dropped from his grasp on to the muddy pavement.

"What?" he said, his voice suddenly sharp and hard.

"I hadn't seen him for years," Lightup continued, looking back to be sure Annie was still behind the far counter. "He came along soon after the London train had arrived—you know, between two and three, sir, this very afternoon. I was standing here for a breath of air after the toffee boiling, you know, sir, and I felt as if I'd seen a spirit. He's as like the old doctor, sir, your respected pa, as ever he could be ; but when one looked again, your pa was stouter and wore better clothes ; and oh, his expression wasn't a bit the same ! He came up from Station Road there, carrying a black bag, and he looked about him as if he were recognizing one bit after the other ; he looked hard at me, but he didn't speak. You see he was leaving school before I began it ; and he looked sharp into the shop. There was only my missis there, and of course he could not recognize *her*. Then he went on up street, as if he were making for the old home. Says I to myself, 'Now, if only old Miss Jane Vernon could be herself again, there'd be quick shuttance to him' ; and then I felt pleased to remember your ma would have you to help her."

The darkness had long ago fallen ; the street-lamps were blurred and dim, and the speakers stood in their own shadows. Lightup, therefore, could not see the expression on his companion's face, but he had ventured into too plain speaking, and in another moment he saw he had forgotten himself.

"There's no reason why you shouldn't be pleased for me to be at home to meet my brother," Mr. Vernon said sternly. "And I see everyone knows he was no favorite with our old aunt. But I *did not know he was expected* so soon. Good-evening."

And opening his umbrella with a loud snap, he went off into the gloom and wet.

Jim Lightup turned back and winked to himself as he went back to his work.

"As if the whole town didn't know," he said to his wife, "that fellow harried his father into his grave. I'd give something to see the brothers meet."

"I never knew the old doctor was married before," she said.

"Cockneys don't know everything," was his ungallant reply. "It was long before I knew you, or you knew me, that this brother ran away from home. The old doctor married foolishly when he was at college and away from his aunt, who kept too tight a hand on him at home. She was a lady, but a silly, spoilt, selfish creature; and when she had lived with Miss Vernon six months, she gave her notice to quit. Then there was a shindy, for the young doctor wasn't old enough or advanced enough to practise; but the end was he went into lodgings with his wife in London, and worked out his time, and then bought this practice and came here, and he hadn't been here a month when his wife died and left him with one boy. Then Miss Jane Vernon came, and here she's been ever since, and it seems to me here she'll be till Domesday; but she never took to that boy, and he was a scamp from his cradle, Mrs. Smith has often told me."

"Lor'!"

The exclamation came from Annie, who had been listening all the time unnoticed. Her father turned sharply on her and bade her shut her ears and her mouth as to what she had heard.

"As if I cared for old-world stories!" she said pertly. "But do the young Vernons know of this queer uncle?"

"Perhaps not. Folks are none so keen to talk about their vagabonds."

"Why, what did he do so bad?"

Now Jim Lightup really knew nothing beyond hearsay. It was commonly reported in the town that the old doctor's eldest son had disgraced his family, and had disappeared. Old Mrs. Lightup had mentioned this much in her letters to her son at the time, but the latter had many interests in his new home, and had not cared to ask particulars concerning events happening in his old home. Young Vernon's disgrace and disappearance had long ago ceased to be mentioned; and now, when Annie asked what the disgrace was, *her father could only acknowledge his ignorance.* And Annie went

back, to answer the shop-bell, determined to take an early opportunity of questioning her boy lover. She rather rejoiced to discover a flaw in his family history; it seemed to bring him a little nearer to her.

"The mud aint all on our side," she said afterward to her mother; "and if Aunt Annie's husband gets to be captain, at least he'll be higher than a plain mister, like William's father."

CHAPTER V

A BLACK SHEEP

MR. VERNON slackened his pace when he was well out of sight of the sweet-shop, and left the High Street as soon as possible, turning up a narrow lane hardly lighted at all, save at long intervals. Then, feeling the unlikelihood of meeting any friend, he went slowly forward, debating with himself as to what he should do. Not an hour had passed since he had fretted and fumed over trifles such as a draught from the window and the homely sounds of family life. But what were they compared to the shameful annoyance now threatening him? To be sure, Lightup might be mistaken. It was a very unlikely thing that he should recognize a man he had not seen, by his own showing, for years; but then the wonderful likeness to his father—"the old doctor's spirit," as he had phrased it—was strange, and the graphic description of the shabby man looking from right to left, as if recognizing the familiar street bit by bit, seemed to point to the truth of the supposition.

"What can the fellow want now?" he argued, as he allowed the certainty of the story; and then, as he pictured his mother's dismay and his old aunt's (that ancient warrior) incapability, he determined to lose no time in going to the rescue.

As he quickened his pace, and went back across the High Street toward his old home, he thought of his boys, all ignorant of the very existence of such a relation, and his anger grew as he pictured their disgust and dismay should the shameful story have to be told them. Since his return he had not once mentioned his brother. The time had passed so happily he did not care to rip open old wounds. *He had taken it for granted that Richard was still in*

South America, making no sign ; that he had accepted his deserved lot, and would never reappear in his old haunts. He hastened on, terribly anxious to know the worst; and as he came in sight of his mother's house, his rapid walk became a run, lest he should not be in time to avert he knew not what.

The door was opened to him almost before his hand had left the bell, and Isoline, bonneted and cloaked, accosted him.

"Oh, I am so thankful !" she cried, as the light from the hall-lamp fell on him. "I was just running to fetch you. Richard is here ; and Aunt Jane has found it out."

As she closed the door behind him, he heard the old woman's high-pitched voice in the dining room, and, only waiting to throw his hat and umbrella aside, he went straight into the room, still wearing his rain-covered cloak.

There stood the wanderer without doubt, and just as he had been described—the father's image at the first glance, the father's caricature at the second. He stood on the rug, his back to the comfortable fire, facing the little old lady, whose mummylike face was distorted with anger.

"Yes," she was screaming, "you broke a good man's heart ; you debased an honorable name. You shan't do it again ; you shan't come back and blight more lives. Look at yourself ! Turn and look at yourself in the mirror ! What do you see ? A gray, disreputable, broken-down rascal—shifty eyes, shabby clothes—fit to look only at yourself and such-like ! Now look at your brother—an honorable man, who looks the whole world in the face—and how came about the difference, eh ? Children of one father, but not, thank God, of one mother !"

"Leave her alone !" he shouted, moving his hand menacingly, as if he could have struck her.

Mrs. Vernon, all the time with a face blanched to snowy whiteness, was holding the old woman's hand, stroking it softly, as if to calm her ; while Isoline stood close by, prepared to catch her should her sudden excitement leave her helpless.

Mr. Vernon went up to his brother, and took his arm. "Stop this, Richard," he cried, in a tone of command. "You and I will talk matters over. This unseemly row must go no further."

As the brothers stood together, they formed, as it were, the types of good and evil. On the opposite wall a full-length portrait of their father looked down on them—the portrait of a prosperous, *honest, and honored man*. Looking at the three faces together,

one saw throughout the same type under different conditions—the handsome, prosperous doctor, honest and honored ; the handsome elder son, debased by the evil spirit within him ; the handsome yet worn face of the younger brother, full of power and decision and intellectuality. On the father's painted face sorrow had yet made no mark ; for when his portrait was taken he was younger than the dishonored son now standing beneath him ; and it was the quick glance at the picture that caused William Vernon in some measure to restrain himself and address Richard without vituperation.

"*I'm making no row,*" the elder explained, shaking himself free from the other's hand. "*I'm much too tired and done for. Take her away, and you'll find me a lamb. I'm tired and hungry too—hungry and homeless, and yet under my father's roof !*"

He spoke with pathos, wringing his thin long hands and looking up at the portrait as if in entreaty. Mrs. Vernon burst out weeping, her kind heart instantly touched. Isoline had never ceased crying since her youngest brother's arrival. Great-aunt Jane looked from one weak woman to the other.

"Tears !" she sneered. "Much good they ever do ! Tears never answer, or I would have shed rivers in my time. Where's Gertrude ? Here, let me go to my room, I thought we'd seen the last of him. When I heard him at the front door just now, I thought it was his father—and I came down all by myself, but someone must help me to get back again. I'm glad his father can never see that wreck again !" She shook her hand—the clawlike hand with its golden bracelet and flashing rings, at him ; and then she, too, broke down with terrible choking sobs awful to hear from her slender, worn-out frame.

Mr. William Vernon lifted her up in his strong arms like a baby, and soothing her tenderly as he went, he carefully carried her up the short flight of stairs leading to her rooms. He was out of breath as he placed her in her easy-chair.

"Why, I'd no idea you were such a load !" he cried, as he stood beside her. "Now don't you trouble yourself about uninvited guests, I'll settle all that."

He pretended to be quite cheerful and hopeful as he patted her hand, and she stopped sobbing to smile up at him.

"Thank God you are here !" she said. "I'm too old to fight any more ; I'm shaken to bits as it is ; but you won't let him stop here *to-night* ? Promise me you'll see him out of the house before you *leave ; promise me.*"

He gave the promise. Never before had he seen the old woman display such weakness. As she had said, tears were not in her line. Indeed, all the time she was convulsed with choking sobs, no tears had fallen down the furrowed face, and for the first time in his life her great-nephew pitied her ; heretofore pity was the last sentiment anyone would have entertained for such a strong, self-reliant character, and the spectacle of her unthought-of weakness made him love her as he had never loved her in her strength.

When he returned to the dining room, he found Gertrude had come in. She was standing in the hall at the partly opened door, listening to the new-comer's voice, her face drawn with fear as she recognized it. Her brother whispered to her not to enter ; her presence would only lengthen Richard's visit, he said.

"If he asks for you," he added, "you can come then."

"Asks for me !" she whispered back. "I dare say he's forgotten my existence." And then she gladly hurried away.

Food had been brought in by Isoline, and her mother was getting a decanter out of the sideboard to place on the tray, while the alien still stood with his back to the fire watching the preparations.

"Sit down, Richard," Mrs. Vernon said, when the table was ready ; "sit down and help yourself."

He obeyed her quickly, and helped himself with the haste of a hungry man ; but before he touched the food he poured out a bumper of wine and drained the glass at one drink. His brother took up the decanter, refilled the glass, replaced the bottle in the sideboard cupboard, locked the door, and withdrew the key, which he handed to his mother.

Richard looked at him, but failed to catch his eye ; so with a significant "Humph," he fell to work with his knife and fork, and for a few moments only the rain and the wind were heard beating and blowing against the windows outside ; inside the fire crackled cheerfully, and the knife and fork made a comfortable accompaniment, while the four silent people cast furtive glances at each other.

Richard ate ravenously, but in time he was satisfied, and seeing no more drink was forthcoming, he left his chair and again took his place on the hearthrug, saying :

"Now let's have it out, and have done with it."

Mrs. Vernon rose. "Shall we leave you together?" she said.

"You don't care to hear what I've suffered all this long time?"
Richard said angrily.

"Your father's sufferings were greater than yours," she replied.

"That's your view, it isn't mine; well, you can go," he exclaimed, crossing the room to open the door, "your son and I can arrange matters without you, only he mustn't forget I'm his father's *eldest* son."

"I'd rather you should remain, mother," William exclaimed. "Your presence will help us both to remember good manners. Isoline had perhaps better go and see after Aunt Jane."

Then Richard bowed his step-sister out with exaggerated politeness, shrugged his shoulders, and went back to his former position.

"Now then," he said, "fire away. Here I am before judge and jury."

Mrs. Vernon shuddered.

"God forbid!" she murmured.

"I should like to hear what *you* have to say," his brother said, in a calm, clear voice. "Would it not have been better to have prepared us for this visit? Was it not rather rough usage to your father's aunt and these unprotected women?"

Richard laughed. "Well, certainly I didn't expect to meet *you* here," he answered. "I haven't read the movements of the Upper Ten for many years past: but, hang it all, a man's not to be blamed for longing to see the old home again, especially if he's penniless, is he?"

"There are circumstances that might make the gratification of such a longing altogether impossible, because altogether wrong."

"I don't think I've troubled any of you too often. It's fifteen years since I made myself known."

"Yes; when your mother's trust money was paid to you after our father's death."

"Exactly. That paltry three thousand which might have helped me once. The idea of a man in father's practice keeping me out of it all that time. He'd never have missed it, and I should have made a pile with it."

Mrs. Vernon fidgeted on her chair. The attack on her husband was more than she could bear silently.

"You had helped yourself," she exclaimed, her usually happy face ablaze with anger. "The savings of years of hard work were freely given in your need; surely you are not fit to question his honesty. I am only your step-mother; but you cannot truthfully say I did not act like a real mother to you. Care and kindness were yours, love was yours, till, till"—then she addressed her son.

"William, this is too hard for me. Let me go. You can tell me what he says afterward ; but I can't sit here and say nothing." She got up and went toward the door, then she turned and looked at her step-son. "Richard," she said, "never once through all these long years since your father died have I forgotten to pray for you. It was hard at first, but he always did after the first shock of—of what you did ; and when he could no longer pray—the few weeks at the last—he would hold my hands while I said the holy words two and three times a day. Some day, when you see things right, come back home ; but till then leave us in peace."

She waved her hand as she went out, and as soon as the door had shut upon her Richard seated himself at the table facing his brother, saying :

"Now then, let's have this over. I see I'm not going to be allowed to stay here. Shall I tell you how I'm situated ?"

William nodded assent. His mother's words had conjured up the scene of his father's death-bed. To him, the good honest son—the words wrung from her innermost being were bitterly affecting, but on his brother they apparently made no impression beyond affecting his present comfort.

"Fifteen years ago, was it ?" Richard began. "It seems longer than that. My mother's money came to me at father's death—her money, and not a dollar over. You all seem to forget the fact of my being the eldest son."

William kept silent.

"My mother's money, and not a dollar more, was paid to my credit. At the time it happened I was hard up, so even that was a godsend. That old fool Fenley recommended me to keep it at three per cent.—so likely. Of course I made a lot more out of it—for a time ; then I was cheated out of half of it, and made bad specs of most of the rest ; but it kept me going, one way or the other, for years, till my partner embezzled every cent I had and left me penniless."

William made no sign, did not even look at him. He knew he was being keenly watched to find out how much he took in, and William did not take in one word.

"Total ruin doesn't impress you much," Richard said, with sarcasm.

"Come to the point," was the rejoinder.

"A lawyer fellow I know—not Fenley, you may be sure—advised me to go to law with the family," Richard continued.

"What family?"

"*My* family—this family. He says as others have said, I being the eldest son, and my father being a prosperous man, what right had you to set me aside, to chouse me out——"

"Gently." William's voice was stern and determined.

His brother paused, then went on in lower tones, "Well, surely I was entitled to some share, if not the lion's share, of his estate. I wish to——"

"Stop. You are evidently unaware that my father left no estate."

"Oh, come now. I can see the will by paying sixpence, you know."

"I don't think you'd like the way you are mentioned in it. But, as you say, you can see it any day, and I repeat he left no estate."

"How about this house and furniture? How do these women make all this show, then?"

"This house and furniture was settled on my mother when she married. Her own little fortune of five thousand pounds was, of course, settled on her and her children. My father owed a heavy debt to our great-aunt, which he paid, as my mother told you, out of his savings; all he could leave my mother and the girls was the insurance on his life of a thousand pounds."

"And your share, what was that?"

"*My* share," said the younger brother, with deep scorn in his voice. "Well, my share is to supplement my mother's poor means."

"You always were a flat," Richard said, then added quickly, "No offence; but do you really mean to say you help to keep this up, and didn't get a dollar out of the old man?"

"I have told you. I'm not in the habit of lying."

Richard leaned his head on his arms, then after a time he looked up and spoke again.

"And I've spent my bottom dollar," he said angrily, "to get over here and assert my rights. Phew! I find nothing but wrongs," he laughed harshly, and at that moment Dalrymple hurriedly entered the room, his clothes shining with rain.

It was the custom in the house to keep the front door always on the latch till it was bolted for the night, and the boy had come in as a matter of course without ringing, and had gone straight to the *dining room*, guided by the sound of voices, without being seen or heard. As his eyes fell on the stranger, he, too, was struck by the

resemblance to his father and the picture, and he stood still in the middle of the room staring, forgetting his politeness in his astonishment.

"One of yours?" said Richard, looking at William.

"Yes."

"Got many of the sort?"

"Six."

"Hem, you must be thunderingly rich to keep two families. Well, nephew, what's your name?"

Still utterly bewildered, Dalrymple managed to answer, and to go forward and offer his hand to the uncle of whom he had never heard.

Mr. Vernon seemed as if he would have interfered to prevent the hand-shake that followed; but he stopped himself, and only bade the boy go home again, and say he should soon be back; he detained him one moment as he accompanied him to the front door to say:

"Don't say anything more to anyone. Can I trust you?"

"Of course you can, father. Not even to mother?"

"Not to a soul. You understand me?"

The boy looked up. "All right, father," he said; "not to a soul."

"Father won't be long," he said, when he reached home; and then he sat down pretending to read, but wondering with all his wits.

"Are you not well, Dimple?" his mother asked presently, struck by his unusual stillness; while George was sure he had been bullied, and the little brother suggested he had met a ghost in the dark.

"You're right, Harold," was the reply; but they got nothing more out of Dimple.

"A fine lad," said Richard, when his brother resumed his seat. "I've got a few of that sort, too, knocking about somewhere, and—as good a wife as ever lived. Poor soul, I haven't even the money to buy a stamp to let her hear from me."

To William's experienced ears, the mention of the good wife was made as an afterthought—a little local coloring put in to complete the picture.

"You see I'm wanted," he only said. "Will you come to the point at once?"

"Certainly; *here it is*. This is my position—absolutely penniless——"

"And your plans?"

"To borrow money from one of you to take me home, *if* I find my father's circumstances were what you tell me."

William took up a train-book lying on a side table, and looked at it for a moment, then he said:

"A train leaves here for London at 8.30. I will give you a ticket up, and something to enable you to see our father's will at Somerset House, and to keep you for a week without starving. In the meantime you will find a boat to take you back again to your wife. *Where* is she?"

The question came so suddenly that Richard blushed up, stammered, and was for a moment at a loss. At last he said, with a certainty not to be suspected:

"Where? Why, at Melbourne, of course."

"Then, Melbourne let it be. This once I will pay your passage to Melbourne. When you have decided on your ship, I will come up and see you off; but mind, it must all be done within one week from now, or the promise is cancelled."

"It costs a lot to go to Melbourne."

"Not second class."

"Second class! Well, you are a hard fellow. I'm not sure I wouldn't rather stop in England a bit. I'm sure I could find work among my father's old friends. Pritchard may want an assistant. Our father's name ought to stand for something good here."

"You know better than I can tell you, you have no chance of work here."

"Overstocked, is it? Well, at all events, I shall certainly stop and have a look at the old place, now I am here. I see one or two familiar names in the 'High.' Surely one of them will give me credit, when they know who I am."

"Then I've nothing more to say," William said, rising from his chair; "only that you can't stay here in this house, and I am due elsewhere."

"Lend me a five-pound note till I look about me," Richard said, in an offhand way, rising also.

"Five-pound notes don't abound with me," William replied. "You've heard my terms."

The brothers stood facing each other. William had drawn himself up, stern and determined. Richard involuntarily straightened *himself, also, as if for the moment he had felt his inferiority. Next he said, "If you as a wanderer came to me on my—ranch,*

let us suppose—I should open my house to you, and bid you welcome to all I had."

"You would have no cause to be ashamed of your guest," was the slow, deliberate reply.

Richard drew a deep breath, and his expression was not pleasant; but he maintained a civil, careless tone as he exclaimed:

"I know what you mean. Can't you let bygones be bygones? Many a good man has been a foolish youth. We grow wiser as we grow older, and live our follies down."

"Will you accept my terms?" his brother asked, unmoved.

"Why, hang it all," Richard cried, striking his open hand on the back of the chair before him, "beggars can't be choosers. What's o'clock? My watch went long ago—from me, not for me." He laughed a discordant laugh, and watched his brother draw his handsome watch from his pocket.

"We shall just catch the last up train," he answered.

As they stood for a moment in the hall, William asked the other where his coat was. "At my uncle's," was the reply, as he took up a battered wide-awake hat and the shabby black bag. "I've nothing on to spoil. My uncle's the only kind relation left now; he takes care of my best things."

William took off the large regulation waterproof he was putting on, and gave it. "Take this," he said, looking at his brother's thin, shabby clothes, as the splashing of the rain outside made itself heard. "It will save you a cold. I have an umbrella."

Then they went out from the well-lighted, comfortable house, and as Richard passed out first, he turned and looked over his brother's shoulder at the well-known hall, with its old-fashioned furniture. Who can tell what scenes he conjured up of the boyhood and manhood he had degraded and disgraced? His thoughts were evidently of the past, for as he passed beside William, he said:

"I wonder if the old man's spirit—if there be such a thing—ever comes and looks out. By Jove! he would be astonished to see us two old fellows!" Presently, he said again, with a yawn, "What a deadly dull place this is! So horribly respectable;" and to these remarks his companion made no answer.

William was all the while thinking and planning, fearing and wondering, as to the best course to pursue toward this shameless brother.

At the station there was a little time to spare. Richard drew

William to the refreshment stall, and almost pleadingly begged for a glass of something hot.

"A cup of hot coffee—strong!" was William's order; and the other drank it under protest, acknowledging, directly after, it was perhaps the best stuff, after all.

As the train drew up, he fidgeted till William took out his purse, asking Richard if he had one.

"What for?" was the answer, "considering I've nothing to put in it."

William put his into his hand.

"Your fare is paid," he said. "You'll find the ticket in that, and three pounds in gold, beside loose silver. That ought to keep you till you read the will and choose your ship. When I hear from you—if it is *within* a week, remember—I will come up and provide you with an outfit; but it must be with the distinct understanding you sail for Melbourne, and promise not to return to England."

Richard pocketed the purse eagerly, almost rapturously, but gave no word of thanks, merely said:

"Any further orders?"

William shivered with the shame which was not his due, and in the noise and bustle of passengers coming and going, he said what he had been compelling himself to leave unsaid.

"Have you forgotten you are in danger as long as you are in England?"

"Rubbish! that's over long ago."

"Only as far as Aunt Jane is concerned; but the treasury can act at any moment."

"It isn't so." Richard spoke defiantly.

The last bell was rung, and the guard opened the nearest carriage door with his "Now then, sir."

Richard jumped in, making no attempt to shake hands with his brother. His last words were, "You'll keep your word?"

"If you keep yours," were his brother's.

Then the train moved off, and William went back to his mother's house, feeling as if he had never before realized sufficiently the possibilities of life.

CHAPTER VI

NO UNCOMMON STORY

It was very late when Mr. Vernon got back to his own home. He had found his mother and sisters excited and frightened, and had to stay and argue away their dread of Richard's return. The old lady was the most sensible. She had quite recovered, and kept him at her bedside till she had again and again talked over what had happened. She was excessively annoyed that Dimple should have seen his uncle. The boys had purposely been kept in ignorance of his existence—whether wisely or not. It was considered wise because he was believed to be dead, and unlikely ever to cross their paths; and now it was impossible to keep Dalrymple at least in further ignorance. Mr. Vernon thought now they had better all be told—if not the whole story, at least enough of it to serve as a warning lesson; but the old aunt thought it would be a terrible shock. "Say nothing to Dimple at all," she urged; "he'll soon forget it, and cease to wonder. If nothing be said, he'll doubt his own sight."

Mr. Vernon gave no promise. He affected an ease and cheerfulness he did not feel. He was particularly vexed to remember Lightup was in the secret. When he left his aunt's room, he motioned to her maid to follow him.

Smith was an old-fashioned servant, with old-fashioned notions of serving her employers as much for love as for wages. She knew the family secrets, and shared its joys and sorrows. The second Mrs. Vernon had found her established with the doctor, when she went first to Cotley, as attendant on the little boy, and in course of time she had become the old aunt's maid, bearing her caprices and tempers, and humoring her many whims with a faithfulness which never wavered. Perhaps there was no sorer heart in the old home than Smith's at this unexpected return of the unrepentant prodigal.

"Oh, Master William," she whispered as they stood together on the landing, "*my poor backbone* opened and shut when I heard *his voice asking for your ma*. I'm thankful I didn't see him.

Miss Jane she came out here when she heard it. We were sitting with the doors open—for she likes to hear what goes on—when she heard his voice, she up off her chair as if she were demented. ‘It’s the doctor,’ she says, and she pushed me aside, and went nimbly down them stairs, and into the dining room in a jiffy, though it’s a month and more since she was able to go down. I verily believe she thought at the time it really was your pa ; and poor thing, when she saw who it was, she set up the awfulest scream ; but your ma shut the door wisely, that cook and Ann shouldn’t pry in ; and I kept a watch on them too.”

“Ah, yes,” said he, for he’d heard it all in his aunt’s room ; “but I want you to prevent others prying. Lightup told me just before that he’d seen Richard, and of course I didn’t let him suppose I believed him. I want you not to tell the Lightups he really was here ; it would only serve to rake up a forgotten story, and be the talk of the town again.”

“Tell the Lightups indeed, Master William ! I’m none so keen on the Lightups. As for that chitty-faced daughter——”

“Oh, never mind her !” he said. “It’s Jim Lightup who’s likely to make a talk. It would be a dreadful story to spring upon my boys, Smith !”

“You tell them first yourself, sir. You can take the vulgar horror off. Tell them not to listen to their schoolfellows. They’ll have to hear tell of these evil things sooner or later ; better let them hear them from you and their ma as a warning, and not as a joke. I’m one for teaching bairns to guard against sin, not for keeping them in dangerous ignorance of it.”

“I want you to make an errand to Lightup’s as early as you can in the morning. You’ll know how to work it. I don’t want you to tell lies, Smith, but——”

“I know, I know what I’ll do, sir. If he tells me he’s seen Master Richard, I’ll recommend him Beauchamp’s pills, and tell him his brain’s disturbed ! He’s an awful one, James Lightup is, for medicine.”

Aunt Jane’s voice was heard loudly demanding Smith’s presence, and then Mr. Vernon got away home. There the miserable story had to be gone over again to his wife. Fortunately only George was up, and he was at his preparation for next day’s lessons.

“Poor Dimple !” his mother said. “I could not think why he *was so silent*. Must that little fellow be told all ?”

“I agree with old Smith,” he replied ; “ignorance is generally

dangerous. I'll tell Dalrymple something of it, but not all—it's due to the lad. When William comes back, he shall know too. I can tell the big lads more than Dal need know yet."

William came home on the Saturday full of the visit he had paid to the Marleons'. The three girls—Ranny, Anny, and Tanny, as they called themselves—had opened to him a quite novel view of girlhood. He was by no means sentimentally taken with them, but made merry over their peculiarities. Their mother looked upon them as strange animals, and frightened them by her strict rules, he said ; but when they were alone with him they were very jolly—"nearly as good as boys for companions." He had a great deal to say, also, about Florence Holroyd. She was of a very different sort to the Marleons, whom she called tomboys.

Mrs. Vernon asked him if he'd lost his heart since he had been away, and was surprised to see his face become red, while his brothers fixed their eyes on him. He stammered something, and she hastened to relieve his unlooked-for embarrassment.

"It was a silly question, dear," she said. "There 'll be time enough for you to lose your heart when you are able to keep yourself. Of course you'll let me choose your wife. She shall be charming."

"What must she be like?" George asked, kicking his elder brother's foot under the table.

"That depends on the prevailing fashion, of course," their mother said, laughing. "Golden hair and blue eyes is the correct style at present. Anyhow, whether she's beautiful or not, she must have charming manners and a sweet, good disposition. Ah, she's somewhere, you may be sure, learning to play her allotted part in life properly."

"She may be behind some counter," George observed, as he stuffed a large spoonful of pudding into his mouth.

The mother laughed in happy ignorance of the implication.

"No," she said, "I'm not afraid of that, Willy. That she will be a lady in every sense of the word, goes without saying."

Dimple choked over his tea, so his mother's attention was diverted from William's very extraordinary conduct. He was putting salt into his coffee and tasting it again and again, quite unconscious why it was so disagreeable. Fortunately Harold and Toby were too much taken up with Dalrymple to look at him, and George chuckled quietly to himself.

It was a rainy Sunday, that most trying of wet days in a young

family. Each boy had an excellent reason for staying at home. They must attend the afternoon school service. Why should they get wet twice in one day? And both parents were as yet too fearful of the English climate to insist on their boys braving it at all risks; so Mrs. Vernon held a little service in the warm dining room, and catechised the three younger boys till her throat ached, when William came to the rescue. He would amuse the little fellows till early dinner, he said; they would have a miracle play while their mother rested.

What a child William was, notwithstanding his nineteen years! his mother thought, as she watched him play; while the little boys, fascinated by the novelty, sat speechless. He and George and Dimple impersonated the giant Goliath, David, and Saul. William puffed himself out with sofa-cushions, and tied the tablecloth round his waist as he stood on a chair for the necessary height, blowing an imaginary trumpet at intervals, and loudly defying and taunting the army of Israel, which was necessarily out of sight. George sat under the table with the poker in his hand, representing King Saul in his tent holding the spear; while Dimple, whose cheeks were first violently rubbed up to give the proper idea of the "ruddy countenance," acted the part of David.

The trumpet-blowing and the bitter taunts were all very well, but when it came to David picking up coals, as the nearest approach procurable to the smooth stones out of the brook, and flinging them at Goliath, and Goliath was remorselessly dragged off his chair and killed with the shovel amid crash of chair and violent shouts, the delight of the little ones exceeded all bounds, and their father appeared on the scene.

"I wonder at you, Amy," he exclaimed, "countenancing such a bear garden on Sunday!"

"Papa used to see no harm in Bible plays on a wet Sunday, dear," she said; "and it only sounds so because everything else is so quiet."

"Well, don't let's have any more of it. Come with me; I want to speak to you."

The little boys barred her exit. "No, no, mamma," Harold cried, "let William play with us. We won't make any more noise; but do let us play on."

"We'll play in whispers," William promised, and so the parents went.

Mr. Vernon was answering a letter from Richard, a letter written

on the meanest of cheap papers, the writing wonderfully like his brother's, and Latin and Greek quotations used in plenty, well written, well expressed—a scholar's letter, though a pedantic scholar's; yet the writer was unable to earn an honest living. Mr. Vernon read it aloud for the second time, and said, as he finished, "I would rather see our lads dead than know they should fall so low."

He took a pen and placed a sheet of paper before him, and dated it, then paused irresolute.

"Perhaps, after all, I'd better run up to-morrow," he said, "and take him unawares, just to see what he's about. You see the boat will start on Wednesday. I can get everything ready, see the captain, and give him a hint about the drink, and then go up again and see him actually off. He shan't have a penny in his own hands till he lands at Melbourne. Yes, I'll do so—then I need not write."

Mrs. Vernon had some pity for the outcast, her husband had none.

"Pity is thrown away on him," he explained, as she urged something in his favor. "He was forgiven again and again in his school and college days; he made my father and poor mother wretched for years; he degraded himself and disgraced us all; and he used his talents only to destroy his companions. Think of the shame and agony my father suffered. I tell you, Richard was as much his murderer as if he had stabbed him with a knife; pity is not for such as Richard."

The boys could not understand their father's grim silence all that dismal Sunday; only Dimple shielded him when the big brothers said it was temper.

"Can't a fellow have heard bad news?" he pleaded, thinking of his father's shabby double, who called himself his uncle. "Perhaps he knows about Annie, Master Bill."

"Well, he'll have to know some day," William answered carelessly, though the mere idea terrified him. "Mind, I shall have to see her after evening service. I don't suppose father and mother will go out to-night. You fellows must dawdle home, to give me plenty of time, or else say I'm gone to sup with grandmother—that'll be best. I ought to go and tell them about my visit."

"You tell that Annie," George cried, "she's not to talk in whispers to me in the shop—before fellows, too; just like her

cheek. I'll take my custom away, I swear I will, if she does it again. I don't want her dying duck's eyes cast up at me—fellows grinning, too."

"I don't suppose the business will go to smash without your pennies," Will cried scornfully.

"Pence make pounds," George said sententiously, "and, I say, did you give her that bulking big ring—'his ring—my ring—our ring!'—George added, mimicking a girl's squeak of affectation. "I should think you got that by weight, avoirdupois weight, too."

Will sniggled uneasily. He dared not resent the remark, though he was sorely tempted. The absurdity of the position struck him as it had never struck him before; but he couldn't allow George to be struck by it also. More and more was the subject altogether becoming a sore one.

Annie had prepared a—in her estimation and phraseology—"most fetching" hat to meet her lover in, after his few days' absence. She had occupied a prominent position in church, where the choir men and boys could also have a good view of her, and she had whispered throughout the sermon, with an equally dressed-out girl friend, both girls turning round occasionally to face the Vernon boys, who sat a few seats further off behind. George divined it was their intention, after church, for Annie to attach herself to Will, and for George to escort the friend, so all the sermon time George sat trembling lest he should not be able to avoid this awful possibility, and the moment the Blessing had been given, and the final Amens sung, he had plunged out of his place, sweeping off a whole row of books in his awkward haste, had trodden viciously on several heels and trains, rousing unseemly passion as he tore on, and finally reached home some ten minutes before Dimple, who, possessed by no such fear of being appropriated, had left the church with calm dignity. So Annie's friend had to be lost in the crowd outside, while Annie, darting round the dark side of the churchyard, was speedily joined, as she expected, by her young lover, and the two walked off into the least lighted streets together.

Then it was that, hardly waiting to hear of her companion's doings in London, she asked him bluntly "had he seen his uncle?" and finding he was utterly ignorant of her meaning, she proceeded to give him a highly colored account, garnishing it with her own *ideas*, and her mother's and her father's surmisings, adding, lastly, *how some friend's friend of the guard of the London train had*

seen Mr. William Vernon shake his fist at a tall man exactly like himself, and how the tall man had made haste to jump into a carriage to avoid being knocked down by him.

"What *are* you saying?" Will cried, standing still in his amazement.

"Gospel truth," she declared; "and Mrs. Smith came to see father next day—as if father didn't guess what she came after. She hasn't been in our back parlor this twelve-month back, and she came in and she says, says she, 'And how's yourself, Mr. Lightup? I want some of your famous mint cushions for my old mistress,' she says, and father burst out laughing! 'Why,' says he, 'young Mr. Vernon bought some for her only last evening,' he says; then he shut the door on me, and you may depend there's something queer. His name's Richard; he was your dear grandpa's son by his first wife. I got that much out of ma; and I think he must be a murderer, or a highwayman robber. It thrills me when I think of it."

To her great surprise, Will clutched her arm with no loverlike grasp, and as if impelled by fear of falling if he stood alone.

"What are you talking about?" he cried, his voice broken and trembling. But she could not realize the horror she had raised in the boy's mind, and answered pertly:

"Bless me! there's vagabones in most high families. I aint making it up, you may be very sure; it's all gospel truth, you bet."

"There are none in ours," he continued, his voice quite out of his control. "Father hasn't got a brother—it's impossible. It's all your make up. It isn't a nice joke, Annie; it isn't kind. It isn't like you to come down on a fellow like this."

He drew her on as some figures came toward them, and was silent till they were again alone in the dim suburban street.

She had hoped to rouse his curiosity, and had planned teasing him and laughing at his surprise; but she had never expected he would display such deep agitation. That he was entirely ignorant of the existence of his uncle she felt sure; therefore why should he be shocked? She was by no means pleased that her story had entirely engrossed him, to the utter exclusion of loverlike attentions due to her after their separation, and as he continued silent, as if forgetful of her presence, though he still leaned heavily on her arm, she exclaimed pettishly:

"Then I wish I'd never told you. Wait till you get home; then *you can ask your pater*. Don't be cross to your little me."

But Will was looking back into the past, searching for some clue, and he had forgotten he was a lover for the time. In learning he had an uncle, half words, hardly noticed, returned to his recollection, scraps of forgotten conversations heard as he had sat reading in his grandmother's house on holidays, allusions wondered over at the instant, and then overlooked. Could it be possible, he asked himself, there was a felon in his family?—this well-ordered respectable family of which he had often rejoiced to know he was a member. Did everyone know it but himself? and when he had sometimes boasted at school of his father's position, had the other lads thought of that "vagabond," as Annie had called him, and laughed at him in their sleeves?

"I can't rest till I find it out," he said at last, after three or four deep sighs from his companion had recalled her presence to him; "but I can't ask my father; he'd cut up so rough if it isn't true. I know what I'll do. I'll go to grandmother's now, directly. I can ask her and the aunts anything."

"Why not ask your ma?"

"Oh, it would shock her so. Perhaps she doesn't know. No; I'll go to my grandmother. Come on, or it will be too late."

He set off at a rapid walk, and Annie, whose boots were tight and uncomfortably high-heeled, wished again that she had held her tongue. She kept up with him as well as she could, as long as she could, and then pretended to cry.

"You'd best go on without me," she whimpered, as he stopped short in dismay. "I thought you'd have been glad to see me. You've seen someone else, maybe, and forgot all your vows and protestations; and, see here, I brought a paper full of those chocolates you like best; but I believe neither chocolates nor me is anything to you now."

"Oh, my poor little girl!" he cried, suddenly brought back to the reality of the present, "why do you doubt your Will? Why, I bought you a brooch in London—the latest fashion. You can't see it by this light," he added, giving her a little box, "so never mind opening it now. You'll find it bears the sweetest name on earth," and then he kissed away her tears, and ate the chocolate with gusto. But his affectionate attention was only a spurt; he began again about the mysterious uncle as soon as the chocolates were finished, and when he parted from her close to her own house he made no tender entreaty for another meeting as usual.

Certainly Annie had cause to think the reunion, as she called it

to herself, had been a failure, though she was the proud possessor of a brooch as large as a five-shilling piece, proclaiming to the world in sham pearls on sham gold that the wearer's name was Annie, "the sweetest name on earth."

His grandmother and aunts were at supper when he got to them, and, to his relief, he heard Great-aunt Jane was in bed with a headache, and was not to be disturbed again. His appearance was greeted with pleasure, and the aunts were curious about his visit, and eager to tell him the news of Cotley. Aunt Gertrude made merry about Lightup's daughter's hat, and described it to him, as she "knew young men never noticed girls' hats." First, she said, the shape had evidently been sat upon sideways, then twelve yards of ribbon had been showered upon it, and seven feathers of sorts, with one ton of cabbage roses mingled, and scarlet poppies had been added, while a brooch representing a dog looking out of a kennel held in the stalks. A moss-green nest upon which a small eagle brooded occupied the apex of the crown. Had not some of these many adornments tickled Will's face as he stooped over them just a little while ago?

"And how that ill-bred girl whispers in church," Aunt Gertrude went on. "I shall ask Mr. Doughty to preach at her, if she goes on like that again."

But though there was a general laugh, Will, with sharpened senses, felt something had happened. He longed to ask the question he had come to ask, and he wondered which statement would make the greatest sensation—the announcement he had determined to make, or that of his foolish engagement to the girl they were deriding, which he would not make known for the world yet awhile. He ate all he could to prolong the meal, and he gave them anecdotes of his little brothers to gain courage in delay; but when the supper tray was carried away, and his grandmother told him it was time to be off home, he was obliged to speak out.

He faced the three, his heart beating fast and his face paling, but he made himself speak out.

"Will you tell me just this?" he said. "Was grandpapa's other son here the other day?"

The six eyes in front of him flashed up at him, and read how much it cost the boy to ask the question. The daughters turned to their mother to answer, the mother's sweet cheerful face lengthened.

"Why do you ask?" she said after an instant's consideration. "*Who has said anything to you?*"

"I was told. I can't tell how I heard : but—is it true?"

Again the mother and her daughters exchanged glances.

"Hadn't he better ask his father?" Aunt Isoline said.

Mrs. Lancing nodded approval.

"Do you hear what Isoline thinks, Will?" his grandmother said softly. "Now your father is at home, you must go to him for family history."

"If there is a dreadful secret," Will burst out, "I'd rather hear it at once, now, from you, granny."

Mrs. Vernon again sought her daughters' counsel. "William might not like me to tell him," she said, and Isoline murmured, "No," while Gertrude said decidedly :

"William is the proper person, mother."

"I think so, too," Mrs. Vernon said. "Your father will tell you everything you want to know, dear," she added to her grandson ; "but I may say this much : your grandfather had a great deal of trouble with his eldest son, and none of us like to talk about him."

"He wasn't a murderer, grandmother?" Will went on, wound up to give vent to his terrible fear. "Just tell me that much—he isn't a murderer !"

"No, no, dear. Don't fancy such a horrible thing. My darling boy, don't fancy such an awful thing as that. Go to your father, and he will satisfy you—at least, not satisfy you exactly, but he will explain why none of us can mention the poor unhappy man with pleasure."

"That'll do, mother," Mrs. Lancing exclaimed; "you are taking away one comfort to add another dread. Go along home, Bill. You are old enough to hear what there is to hear."

"Tell us this much before you go," Mrs. Vernon asked. "Who said Richard had been here?"

Bill had not foreseen this question, and was for the moment dumb. His grandmother saw his hesitation, and urged her enquiry again.

"You only came home yesterday," she said ; "it could not be anyone in your own or in this house. Oh, I know," she added ; "it was Dimple ; he came in, you know, girls, when Richard was here."

"Oh, mother, now you've told him ! Oh, mother, pray don't go on !"

Mrs. Vernon saw her mistake. "Well, there now," she cried, "I *can't help it ; but, Bill, it was Dimple, wasn't it ?*"

"What? Dal knows more than me!" he exclaimed. "Well, that is fine!"

"Then he didn't tell you?" Isoline said. "Who did, Bill, dear?"

He colored. "I can't tell you; but no one you know—much."

"What did he, she, or it say?" Mrs. Lancing asked. "We must know; you must tell us; it is of the greatest—at least it is of importance we should know what was said."

"I hardly know. Something was said about my uncle. I did not know I had one. I only supposed there was something dreadful, or I should have known of him."

"Can't you say who told you?"

"I can't."

Again he colored and hung his head.

"Let him go," Isoline said. "Shall I walk with you, dear?"

Then he laughed. These aunts never seemed to realize he was no longer a little boy; and once out of the house, he never stopped running till he was at home again.

Only his father and the boys were waiting for him; his mother had gone to bed. Mr. Vernon scarcely looked at him; he was nervous; he had made up his mind to tell the boys about his step-brother, and he did not know how best to say it.

"Not in bed, Dal?" Will said, as a hint to his young brother to be off.

"I kept him up," Mr. Vernon said. "I have something to tell you, boys; something it is time you should know—a very painful story."

Will and Dalrymple guessed in a moment what was coming. George looked amazed; he felt sure it was about Annie Lightup. Mr. Vernon's face was drawn and sad; he hesitated how to begin. He got up and changed his seat to one less in the light of the gas. He stirred the fire, and put some books together, his mind at work all the time upon how he should tell his story. His boys watched him keenly, wondering at his unusual indecision, two of them dreading to hear, one of them anticipating some amusement; but at the first words his father uttered George was all keen excitement, not for William, but for himself.

Mr. Vernon talked in a low but very distinct tone as he related his step-brother's story; the high hopes entertained for his ability; the ending in disappointment; the frequent forgiveness for boyish *tricks of deceit and theft*; the attempt made again and again to

reform and raise his character ; the gradual hardening against home affection and control ; the habits of intemperance growing with his growth ; the flight from his tutor's ; and then, when he had parted with everything on which he could raise money, his return home ragged and beggared, to be again forgiven, again believed in. At last he managed to keep quiet for a time, while he passed as a surgeon, and then he settled down as his father's assistant. For long his father believed he was keeping straight, but he was bitterly awakened. He appropriated money paid in to his father, made false entries again and again, and ran up bills with those of his father's tradespeople who were also his father's patients. The inevitable arrived, and then the defaulter agreed to go out to Australia and begin a new and different life ; but before he started he forged his great-aunt's name, and drew out successfully the accumulations of her pension, which amounted to over two thousand pounds.

"That was the last blow, which killed your grandfather," Mr. Vernon said, shading his eyes with his hand as he spoke. "He had condoned so much, and was so willing to believe the fellow meant to reform, that this climax of guilt was more than he could bear."

The boys' faces had flushed and paled as their father slowly and solemnly recounted the story of his step-brother's shame, and now, as he stopped for a moment, they waited breathlessly without asking a question ; they felt as if they dare not break in upon his bitter recollection. Presently he continued, still as if forcing himself to speak against his wish.

"Aunt Jane had never loved him, or believed in his reformation ; but for my father's sake she behaved very handsomely when all was settled for him to emigrate, and promised him two hundred pounds with which to begin his new life. He learnt then for the first time of my father's generosity to her in allowing her pension to remain untouched for so long, and managed so to deceive her man of business, and to imitate her writing, that the whole amount was drawn, and in his possession, before she knew that he was aware she had so much. The fraud was discovered only a day or two before he was to sail, and in her first anger Aunt Jane determined to prosecute him, declaring a term of imprisonment would do him good, and bring him to his senses. We were at dinner that night and talking of my father's intended visit to *Plymouth*, to see Richard start, when Aunt Jane got the lawyer's

letter telling her what had happened. I am sure, if sinners could see the awful agony their deeds cause to the innocent, they would not dare to continue in their wickedness. I can't describe the terrible horror that then suddenly fell upon us. My father and mother pleaded as only they could plead to keep Aunt Jane from making the thing public, but she would not hear them. She was well and active in those days, and she started off by the mail train for London that same night, that no time might be lost in apprehending Richard. My father went up by the same train without her knowledge, and while she went to sleep at a hotel, to be ready to act as early as possible in the morning, he went on through the night to Plymouth, where he told Richard of his danger. He never told me what happened further ; he was at home again late the next night, before Aunt Jane came back, and at his work as usual next day. When she returned he went to hand her out of the cab, and when she saw him she started back, so greatly was he changed with the distress he was in. 'You are surely not grieving for that reprobate?' she asked, when we were all together in the drawing room. My father lifted his hand as if he could not bear she should say so, and then he was seized with his first slight stroke of paralysis. It was when she saw how terribly he did feel that she repented and stopped proceedings, and Richard got away somehow, and never made a sign of his existence till my father died."

"Did he give back the money?" Dalrymple asked after a while.

"Not he ; but my father repaid Aunt Jane. There is more for you to hear. He appeared here again one day last week—beggared. He promises to return to Australia, if he is furnished with money. He is a shame and a disgrace to an honest name, and I think I am wrong in bribing him to go ; but I have promised, and I hope we have seen the last of him this time. I suppose I need not ask you never to repeat all this when Fabian comes home? I will tell him. Now, boys, to bed, and pray, as you have never prayed before, that you may walk uprightly."

His solemn, earnest appeal touched them deeply ; each tall lad kissed his father's cheek as he said good-night, with a childish longing to express his sympathy. The few words of exhortation closing the sorrowful story were more eloquent than a long speech.

Yet it was no uncommon story, nor of an uncommon nature.

CHAPTER VII

HOPES AND FEARS

WHEN the boys met their mother at breakfast in the morning, she said she was glad they had been told about their uncle, adding :

"I hope this is the one and only secret that will ever come between us."

William's conscience pricked him. He longed to be able to echo Dalrymple's eager, "Of course it is," but she took his assent for granted.

"It all happened before I knew your father," she added; "so it seems almost as unreal to me as it must seem to you—like a story in history; but your father, I know, did not tell you how all the disgrace affected him. He was sure of the scholarship you are hoping to get, George, and he would not take it; he fancied the name would be known, though my father always said no one, beyond the few who were interested in preventing the story getting about, knew the rights of it; and in giving up the scholarship he gave up his most cherished plans."

"Gave up the chance of going to Oxford?" George said, with a "whew" of wonder and pity.

"But it was all for the best," she continued. "He passed into the Indian Civil Service among the first five, and see how he has got on."

The boys had come down with a weight on their minds; they had never before realized the possibility of sorrow and shame coming home to themselves. William especially, having a burdened conscience, had bitterly felt his own shortcomings, and in the darkness and silence of the night had resolved to break with Annie, and do his utmost to get employment; but the morning was sunny—that rare morning sunshine which sometimes comes in November, lighting up the dying leaves, painting the fields and waysides with gorgeous colors, bringing out the lark and the thrush to trill their sweetest in vain belief that summer has returned, and *dispelling in man's breast the gloom and disgust begotten by the*

dark dank yesterday. The brightness streamed into the cheerful breakfast room, a scent of lingering summer odors came in through the open window, and there was the mother's lingering kiss and joyful shouts from the little brothers to greet them. Even William, face to face with an undreamed-of difficulty, let the vapors of his brain go with the vapors of the morning, and rejoiced again in his youth.

The father came down late, and left for London directly after breakfast. William went with him to the station, and managed to stammer out his wish that he could get employment "of any sort." "I'd even go into a bank," he added, as if his sincerity was sufficiently proved by offering to sink so low as a bank clerk. And as he retraced his steps alone, his spirits came back to almost their usual height. Of course his father wouldn't put him in a bank, he told himself, unless, indeed, Grindley or some other Indian swell banker chose to take him in as junior partner or something of that sort; but he had conveyed to his father his desire to be at work, and showed him he had got over his longing to enter the army.

When he got home again, he taught Toby one of Dr. Watts' hymns, especially emphasizing the couplet which sets forth how—

"Satan finds some mischief still,
For idle hands to do."

Then he raked up the leaves in the front garden, and cut off the dead chrysanthemums, and took half a loaf of bread to clean his best gloves with, economically feeding the chickens with the discolored waste, coming into luncheon not only with a good appetite, but with a good conscience. Father must have gone on his sad errand with the comforting reflection that *his* eldest son was determined to go honestly to work immediately.

His brothers went to school almost expecting their schoolfellows would show some knowledge of the tragic family event, Dalrymple especially being prepared to fight any fellow who should twit him about his disgraceful relation. It seemed almost strange the usual routine should be undisturbed, the usual adoration of the smaller boys should be paid to the elder brother, and the *bon camaraderie* of all ages be unaltered. So, by the afternoon, both boys had resumed their usual happy, careless moods, and long before their father's return at night the story had lost much of its dread.

Mrs. Vernon went nearly every day to see the elder ladies; indeed, Miss Jane considered it a personal insult if neither her great-nephew nor his wife looked in. She considered two visits were due from the wife for one from the husband. And though Mr. Vernon had expressly declared no relations were to interfere with them, yet it was soon evident how impossible it was to lead their own lives independent of the old home in Great Street so long as they lived in Cotley—it is so easy to plan at a distance from the scene of action. We all live in a spider's web of circumstances. Each of us is a spoke in a wheel, no one can live entirely as he chooses—except in thought. There everyone has a world to himself with which none can meddle—"My mind to me a kingdom is"—and without these free hunting grounds, these limitless spaces, these private galleries full of pictures and possibilities and treasures, we should lead lives no better than those of the lower creation. Many a blind man sees infinitely vaster views, infinitely fairer pictures with the eyes of his mind than the man whose sight is perfect. It was a decided drag on Mrs. Vernon's time to be obliged to pay this daily duty visit, to be questioned and cross-questioned and misunderstood by the great-aunt. Toward her, though she felt a little pity for her closing life, she felt none of the affection that made her intercourse with her mother and sisters-in-law no duty, but an absolute pleasure. Yet she made herself pleasant to the old woman, and rarely neglected a daily visit—for duty's sake.

The carriage that had exercised the boys' suppositions before their parents' return had become a matter of fact, though instead of the dashing turn-out they had hoped for, the mother had contented herself with a single horse and small brougham. Only one saddle-horse was kept, on which the boys rode turn about when their father didn't want it. Those "ponies each" which they had looked for to impress their schoolfellows, had passed away as a dream. Yet even the one-horse brougham was not unqualified comfort, for though it enabled Mrs. Vernon to make calls at a distance, and to pay that daily visit with dry feet in wet weather, yet Miss Jane chose to consider it as a family affair, and never hesitated to press it into her service if she was tempted to take a drive; and if she chose to go out, Toby had to be left at home, for she always said he danced on her toes, even if he sat outside by the coachman. To leave Toby at home with comparatively new servants was a grief to his mother, who was never really happy without the companionship of at least one of her children; but there came some

comfort with the shortening days and strengthening cold, for then Aunt Jane became less and less inclined to leave her warm rooms.

Miss Vernon had ordered her great-nephew to go straight to her when he came back from town, and his wife was told to meet him there, that they might all hear his news together.

Mrs. William drove to the station, however, to meet him there, and take him comfortably to his mother's, and Isoline had posted herself at the hall door to let them in quietly, that he might have a cup of warm tea after his cold journey before he went upstairs.

These elderly conspirators, talking in whispers over their tea, like children who knew they were doing wrong, chuckled—notwithstanding the gravity of the occasion—at so successfully carrying out their little scheme. It tickled Mr. Vernon's fancy to think how he, "The Mighty Lord of the Province," the adviser of rulers and dignitaries, the head and administrator of a little army of retainers, paramount over hundreds of thousands, should yet tremble before the anger of an old and almost helpless woman.

"Was your train late?" Great-aunt Jane demanded, when at last the culprits entered her presence. "I heard it shriek punctually enough."

No answer—silence seemed best.

"Well, now you are here, please let me hear what you've done. Smith, you can go till I ring for you; you shall be told as much as it's proper for you to know, in due time. But, my dear boy, you look tired out; have a glass of wine first. I should have thought your mother might have given you a glass as soon as you came in."

"I did offer him some." Poor Mrs. Vernon felt quite a prevaricating wretch.

"Well, you needn't, you know I've always some up here. You might have let me have the pleasure of giving him some. You never take wine before dinner? Well, why didn't you say so sooner, and save all this loss of time? Now, my dear boy, let's hear all about it."

There was not much to tell. He had gone to the address Richard had given—a respectable inn enough, to be told the gentleman only slept there, and was absent all day; but as luck would have it, he had met Richard at the docks—a miserable looking object, his brother said—and together they had gone to an outfitter, where a respectable rig-out was ordered to be sent to the *ship named*. Together they had afterward interviewed the cap-

tain of the steamboat, and finally William had promised to be in town again in time to see his brother off.

"We parted in the docks," he added, "and I went back to the ship alone, and asked Captain Winn to look after Richard, telling him something of his story, though of course nothing of his wrongdoing. A man like Winn read between the lines, no doubt ; he's seen something of shady characters, and he was very good."

Mr. Vernon did not add how he saw his brother had been drinking hard—that he had not a sou left, that the waterproof cloak had even been pawned, and that he acknowledged he owed a bill at his inn. He was too disgusted to bear to repeat all this, except to his wife, whose silent sympathy was comfort in itself.

"So far so good," Miss Vernon said ; "but I shall be thankful when day after to-morrow is gone and he with it. But," she continued, turning from one to the other, while her clenched hand beat the table before her with emphasis, "mark my words, he'll be back again, some day. We haven't done with him yet."

How well they all remembered her words and gesture when her prophecy was fulfilled.

For the present all went well. The ship started with the out-cast among her passengers ; and as the brothers stood on her deck together, just before her gangway was removed, Richard spoke as if some latent sense of obligation made itself heard.

"Good-by, William," he said. "If I can't do anything in return for this lift, I can at least serve as a warning to your boys. Give my love to mother and the girls, but not to that old she-wolf, Aunt Jane. Good luck to you."

William put out his hand. He could not do otherwise, now the last moment had arrived.

"You can make us all glad to see you yet, if you choose," he said. "Better be a good example than a warning."

Richard laughed uneasily. Then as the younger was leaving him, he exclaimed :

"Wife, children, home, position, are yours. What have I ?"

He turned away hurriedly, and when William, standing on the quay and watching the big ship being warped from her moorings, looked for him among the crowd gazing wistfully from the ship's side toward the friends on shore, he was not to be seen. Had he gone below, to hide his unwonted emotion, or to drink to a *prosperous voyage* ?

With a heavy heart, Mr. Vernon went to execute some commie-

sions at the stores, and there met Colonel Holroyd fretting and fuming because he could not get hold of a shopman to serve him, and was obliged to wait his turn to get near the counters.

"There's no respect whatever left in England," he said. "Now, a Parsee fellow in India recognizes his superior, and waits on one with civility; but here one is pushed to and fro, hustled about, and sent from pillar to post. I've a good mind to report that clerk fellow. He actually went on serving a shabby old coolie woman, without taking any notice of me, though I told him I'd no time to spare."

"Ah, they've no time to recognize rank here. First come, first served. The old woman's money is as good as yours."

"A levelling, Communist principle. If I hadn't shares in it, I'd cut the whole concern. A peaceful shop on the old lines is far better than these overgrown godowns; one may have to pay a little more, but one gets peace and civility. I've been here since ten o'clock. It is now one, and I haven't got half I want, while I'm as tired as if I'd been racing for a wager. Let's go and see if we can get anything fit to eat."

Glad to be amused, Mr. Vernon followed to the dining room, and listened—as he would listen at a theatre—to his companion's fault-finding. Nothing suited him. The mulligatawny choked him; at the curry his indignation was extreme; and when the plate of hot lamb was served, he insisted on seeing the manager, to whom he denounced the meat as "goat—*old* goat." He recovered over the sweets. "Europe tart" was nowhere compared with meringues full of whipped cream, and "maids of honor" cheesecakes; and as he dawdled over a cup of black coffee, he began to think the Parsee godown of a Mofussil station hardly up to the mark, after all. Of course, their talk went to the rupees, and they agreed the sooner the rupee went down to eightpence or tenpence the better, for then the cry which would go up from the much-enduring Anglo-Indians must bring about redress or mutiny. From the rupee of paramount importance, what to do with the boys was the next subject. Colonel Holroyd's boys would be anything their father wished, but objected to everything he proposed.

"They think I'm made of money," he groaned; "and can keep them doing nothing indefinitely. I have a cousin, who could get one of them into a good bank, but my fellow can't manage the entrance examination. What a bank clerk wants with Latin, I *can't* tell!"

Mr. Vernon was interested now. Had not William thought of a bank rather than be idle? but had he bargained for an exam?

"I thought any youth who could write and cast up correctly could get into a bank," he exclaimed. "Is there an exam. in spelling, too?"

"Oh, isn't there? and that would stump my Bob at once. But they are too free with their competitive exams.; there's many a clever capable man who can't spell—it's a want of ear, I'm told. My poor father, who was a famous brigadier in John Company's days, never could learn to spell. I've got letters of his, that, 'pon my word, puzzle me to make out their drift."

"I suppose he'd have his reports written for him?"

"Oh, his writing was beautiful, but the spelling! Well, where would he have been nowadays! Why, I've often heard him tell how he was at school, playing at marbles, when his commission came, and he was ordered to join his regiment at once—no coaching and cramming for him. And when he left Bombay, after fifty years' hard service, his soldiers crowded to the *Bund* to see him off, and wept like children. Ah, we don't want scholars so much to fight our battles; we want men, brave, good men—and that *he* was."

"But as the authorities insist on having scholars—scholars our boys must be, if they want to work under Government. The fact is, our boys are too uppish. In all classes it's the same. Few care to be the working bees; they'd soil their conscience sooner than their fingers. But time will right it all; the much talked of dignity of labor will be a reality instead of a sentiment, when extended education has had time to work with real practical results. I think it's all tending that way. Even women are becoming proud to get their own living. Fifty years ago a lady, using the term in its common significance, would have made a dozen paltry excuses had she been seen doing something useful with her hands. She is beginning to glory in her handicrafts now."

"I don't know what the world's coming to; decent people can't live in it comfortably."

Mr. Vernon laughed.

"I for one manage to get a great deal of happiness in it as it is," he said, "and I hope you'll class me among the decent people."

"Ah, your boys are clever fellows."

"*That remains to be seen.* By the by, if neither of your boys

cares to go into your cousin's bank, will you use your interest with him to get my William a chance?"

"My dear fellow, of course I will; but you, with your connection, can surely do something better for him in India?"

"I might if I had him out there; but you see, I have only another year to put in, and when I've left, my influence will be gone too. However, I might manage something in salt or indigo, eh?"

"To let you into a secret, my fellows will have a little money some day, and they know it, and they are lazy in consequence, being sure of something at last. I've known good fellows actually ruined by expectations. They act like paralysis on the mind, unless, indeed, the expectations are great—that's another thing; but a small sufficiency is a big curse to a man. In my father's time, the rupee was worth two and six every anna, so he could put by for his children, though we can't touch the principal; he made it trust money, worse luck."

Colonel Holroyd began to get gloomy again, and the man he at last got to serve him had a hard time of it; whereas Mr. Vernon went off to catch the train, considerably brighter for the talk with his old friend. Richard, too, was safely off, and once more started fair. The kindness the younger brother had shown was already feeling its reward, in the renewed hope warming his breast.

He had not known when he left home by what train he should return, so when he reached Cotley there was no one to meet him. It was a dark, drizzling evening, and he took a cab; driving first to his mother's, where he only remained long enough to tell how he had seen Richard off. He then drove on toward home. The streets were almost deserted, and most of the shops were already closed, though it was hardly eight o'clock. At Lightup's the shutters were up, but the door was open and the bright light from within streamed out across the dark muddy pavement. As Mr. Vernon passed, he noticed two figures standing in the doorway—a girl and a man. The girl's upturned face had a bright side glare on it, the man's face was in shade; but though the glance was but momentary, something in the shadowed head and figure was unmistakable.

"What upon earth," Mr. Vernon cried to himself, "is the fellow about? She had her hand on his arm. Why, surely Bill has better taste than that."

It was impossible for him to think Bill was doing anything

more than other silly youths of the school, who were accustomed to consider Annie Lightup a jolly little girl who liked broad compliments and gave good weight in sweets in return? Indeed, he remembered how he himself had once looked admiringly at Jim's flashy sister in that same shop, and had nearly come to blows with another sixth-form boy about her.

"But who would have thought it of Master Bill?" he continued to himself; "he's getting too old for fooling." And then he decided he would look sharper after him: he was too apt to forget Bill was grown up, and to set him aside as a mere boy. Luckily for Bill, his father had a stupid cabman who took him up and down the road before he found the house, being just twice as long in getting there as he need have been. So by the time he'd satisfied his wife that he was neither wet through, nor exhausted for want of food, nor dying with cold, Bill had come in by a short cut through the back lane, and when he was asked for, was ready with his brothers to sit down to dinner.

His father gave him a searching look, but saw no guilt on the bright, handsome, boyish countenance, and ended in believing himself mistaken. Will would not have been so calm had he guessed how near he was to detection. He had made his peace with Annie, only too thankful she had not questioned him about his uncle. Her vain mind had, in fact, ceased to feel an interest in so remote a subject, especially as her lover had forgotten her for the time in it; and although his admiration was being little by little sapped away, he was too chivalric to allow that it was waning. The big ring on her finger, which he had bought cheap from an under master who was dreadfully in debt, was to him a real pledge and strong link binding her fate to his.

The idea of the bank grew. Friends came forward to tell of the ease with which men they knew had got on from beginning as bank clerks, of marvellous possibilities after three or four years' work in London, in foreign and colonial banks; indeed, it appeared, according to some ardent spirits, that to be a bank clerk was *the* only opening for a man of parts or without parts. Eighty or ninety pounds a year seems such a splendid commencement for a boy of eighteen or nineteen; it is only when the twenties are turned, and a home of his own is desirable, that the small rise in the long years looms so hopelessly before him.

To William the prospect was sufficiently alluring, for he could *not bear the idea* of seeking work in India so far from his newly

recovered home. So Colonel Holroyd was interviewed, and his cousin was willing to take the young man, "if he passed a satisfactory examination."

Aunt Gertrude's *protégé*, Mr. Doughty, the curate, laughed at, as did George and Dalrymple, the "potty" questions dignified by the name of examination. Mr. Doughty put William through an old paper—"a preliminary canter," he called it, and was sure the boy could come out at the winning-post. The masters of the Grammar School were not so sanguine among themselves, but they would not hurt Mrs. Vernon's feelings by prophesying failure. The masters to a man were greatly taken with Mr. and Mrs. Vernon. At their house they could escape the "shop" talk so prevalent in other houses; no little notes of excuse were ever penned by Mrs. Vernon, tender mother though she was, to tie the master's hands or suggest "improvement" in the curriculum of the school. So one cold December day William went up to town to learn his fate, being followed over the threshold at starting by old slippers thrown by his little brothers for luck. He was not quite sure of success on his return. The paper this time was much more difficult than the old one he had studied; there were some "beastly long words no one would ever want," and "the geography was about places no one ever went to. He knew his Latin was wrong; but he thought his French was right. As for the spelling, he was doubtful, and he dare not run letters into each other, as he always did when he was in doubt, for by so doing his writing would 'bos' him." So there was nothing for it but to wait till after Christmas, when the result would be known.

CHAPTER VIII

GIRLS AND BOYS

THE wet and cold and gloom outside, the draughts and noises and smoky fires inside the house, and the incompetency of servants, were all evils to be condoned by Mrs. Vernon, because her boys were a panacea for all worries, in this her first Christmas in England after years of absence. They were at home all together; who could tell when *they should be all together at Christmas again? Certainly not next Christmas.* Mr. Vernon would spend it, as she

had so often spent it with him, in East Indian sunshine. The pillars of the veranda would be wreathed with fragrant blossoms and hung with glowing fruit ; the servants would appear in flower necklaces and bracelets in honor of the sahib's *burra din*. They would do honor in their simple way to their master's high festival, and they would look for the gifts that master would bestow on them, as his way of keeping up the Christmas boxes of his fatherland custom. The head *kidmutghar* would salaam profoundly, and probably raise his eyes and hands and invoke blessings on the absent mem sahib, and on the little boys he had so often played with ; and the lonely sahib's eyes would soften, though his voice would wax rough lest his emotion should be visible. All this Mrs. Vernon pictured as she dressed on this happy Christmas morning at home, and was almost inclined for the moment to forget the present satisfaction as her imagination went ahead of time. But sounds outside her door quickly recalled her to the reality :

" Hark ! the herald angels sing,"

rang out from her boys, the shrill trebles in the doubtful English of the youngest harmonizing with the trained voices of the elders, Fabian's steadily leading and making up for occasional giggles from George and Dalrymple.

They were indeed herald angels to the mother listening in ecstasy ; and even the father, who stood at his dressing-room door, was touched and softened by the unexpected serenade. Both thought of the little girls "singing in paradise." Was it not possible they were catching faint echoes of their brothers' voices rising in glad accord with theirs ?

The little fellows had been able to learn the first verse only ; but they bravely struggled on through the next two, coming in for the well-known refrain at the end with redoubled energy and force. Each note from each dear mouth struck on the mother's heart with mingled pain and pleasure, and as they ceased she flung open her door to kiss them ; but they were all in their nightshirts, regardless of the bitter cold, and as she appeared there was a stampede of bare feet, and peals of hardly suppressed laughter, as they gained their rooms. To them there was no mingling of emotions, only fun and joy.

"Oh, those tiresome brats," William said, when they were all at breakfast : "they were such a nuisance to teach. Did you never

guess, mother? I never expected the little kids would be able to keep the secret; Fabian and I drummed it into them when you were out."

"Didn't they catch it, too!" said Fabian, pinching Harold's ear. "They knew they'd be mast-headed if they didn't hang on to the tune right. It cost me a fortune in sweets to bribe them."

"I hammered it out on the piano so often," William continued, "I really expected it would be playing it of its own accord. George nearly spoiled it all; he's such a fellow for grinning."

"So would anyone grin," cried George, "to see the banker at the piano, beating his foot all out of time and sweating away."

Fabian had come off the *Britannia* as a midshipman, third on the list, bringing home several prizes, besides the sword of honor. He was already gazetted to a ship, and expected orders to join. He would therefore be the first of the brotherhood to leave the nest.

Dalrymple had "stuffed up," as he expressed himself, the little boys to believe Fabian was already an admiral, and they also believed he had the privilege of using his dirk to decapitate anyone who displeased him. The middy was quite ready to pose as a hero. By his own account, his railway journey home was unsurpassed in the memories of the much-enduring guards all the way from Dartmouth to London. The boys had climbed in and out of the carriages, and even bearded the guard in his van; they had blinded most of the porters at most of the stations *en route* with pea-shooters; they had promenaded on the tops of the carriages when the train was going at full speed, and had seated themselves in the carriage windows, with their legs dangling outside, as the train thundered through small stations. Their fame had gone before them, and at Paddington they had been interviewed by the head officials, and warned that a report of their misdoings, which outdid all the misdoings in former holiday journeys, should be forwarded to the ship without delay.

"I couldn't keep the fellows quiet," said Fabian, when his father declared their proceedings were scandalous; but to his brothers in private he made it pretty clear that he had led the mischief.

There were many admiring glances cast at the six handsome boys in church that morning. It was a day to be remembered by them all. Even Great-aunt Jane was smiling and funny as they all met for early dinner in the old home. Each boy found a Christmas box in his dinner napkin, placed there by her own hands.

Aunt Isoline was all excitement. A photograph of Mr. Truman, taken in Rangoon, had reached her that very morning, beautifully framed in carved ivory. The boys secretly wondered at her taste as she gave each the treat of inspecting it.

"Not altered in the very least," she said. "What a comfort to feel sure the climate agrees with him!"

"Why, he's an old man!" Dalrymple thoughtlessly exclaimed; while the elder and more complaisant nephews declared they should have known him anywhere.

Great-aunt Jane chuckled. "And Isoline is growing an old woman," she said. "*I say, they'd better look quick.*"

"The best fellow, nearly," Gertrude exclaimed, "that ever lived! Why, he's better than you, William! My boy would have been a clergyman and a missionary. I should have gone with him; and then, Isoline, you could have come to us. What games you would have had, boys, with your Cousin Leonard!"

"Any more portmanteaus wanted?" Mr. Vernon asked his youngest sister. "Amy can let you have two or three, now she's settled down. Or don't you continue to keep his letters? What a find they will be for an antiquarian two or three centuries hence!"

"Will her executors have to read them all through, when she dies?" her mother asked.

"Such folly!" cried Great-aunt Jane; "such waste of time and stamps! That money bestowed in charity would be doing real good."

"It is charity—it is real good to me," Isoline cried, her eyes brightening and cheeks flushing.

"Bravo, Aunt Issy!" Will said, clapping his hands softly; "and I dare say great-aunt had reams of love letters in her time."

"You saucy boy!" she cried, accepting the soft impeachment with a smile. "What can you know about lovers and love letters? Here, Smith!" Then she suddenly changed her voice, as if struck by a new idea. "Smith," she cried, "what did you say? or did I dream it?"

"What, Miss Jane?" Smith replied, always within reach of the old mistress' call.

"Why, what was that you said about love letters and Master Bill there?"

There was an instant's silence. Bill stared blankly at his great-aunt; the boys grinned; his mother laughed; such a ridiculous

fancy it seemed to her. What a relief Bill felt when the old servant unhesitatingly pronounced it a dream, and then the old aunt was satisfied. But the brothers felt Smith really knew something, and were relieved when they were dismissed to take their little brothers home, and to amuse themselves as they liked. It was a fatal permission. No sooner were they at home than the little ones were put into the servants' hands, and Fabian suggested a novel and agreeable manner of celebrating the great festival.

"Let's take a bottle of wine and drink it among the chimney-pots on the roof," he said.

The idea struck Dalrymple and George as altogether "bimming," but William demurred about his clothes.

"You may as well own you are funky," Fabian sneered. "Why, look, colonel, you might picture yourself at the head of your men, storming a fort. Go and change your best clothes, if you like, but be quick, or the daylight won't hold out."

Will was no coward, if he was weak ; beside, it was rather a fine idea, after all. So he changed his clothes, and put on gloves to preserve his hands.

Fabian buttoned the wine under his coat, George pocketed a glass, then Fabian led the way, swarming up a thick water-spout and gaining additional footing on the stone coping bordering the house corner. Climbing the steep roof was the most formidable part of the undertaking ; but they all at last, more or less hurt, gained the coveted eminence and found comfortable seats between the low chimney-pots. From this height they could see all along the suburban road leading to the town, all the church spires, the school cupolas, and the river beyond the town meandering through level meadows. Many houses like their own, standing in gardens, stretched away up the road till the buildings ceased and only the lonely country stretched away to the horizon, the dull leaden sky just broken in the west by faint sunset coloring.

"What a pity people don't frequent their chimney-pots," Fabian said, as he enjoyed the prospect ; "rooms are such stupid shut-up things." And the rest agreed with him.

The neck of the bottle was then broken, and they proceeded to drink the wine in very small sips, for, save for the honor and glory of the thing, wine was not nice to their inexperienced taste, and in each mind unexpressed was the wonder as to how they were to dispose of what remained. A bright idea struck Dalrymple, and he *proposed they should "chuck some down the kitchen chimney, to*

alarm the maids." No sooner said than done ; a good quantity was thrown, and a corresponding stream of smoke rewarded the thrower. A faint murmur came up after it, as if the shower had caused surprise. The boys silently enjoyed the joke, and, after an interval, repeated it ; this time the murmur swelled into screams, an effect which was still more enjoyable. However, they were wise enough to refrain from any further trick, not wishing to be discovered, and, as the twilight was deepening, they made their way to an attic window, which was fortunately open, and so gained their rooms unnoticed, and having made themselves clean again, they noiselessly went out to visit some friends, returning about an hour before dinner to find their parents at home listening to Harold's account of ghosts in the kitchen chimney.

"There comed a scream from cook," he said, his eyes dancing with excitement, "and me, and Ann, and Toby, and Sarah, and Jane, we all flew in, and we said, 'What is it?' we said ; and she said, 'The devil is in the chimbley !' she said, she did ; she sweared reg'lar, and you can ask Ann ; she said, 'O 'orror !' And while we were there, it comed again like a cattlerack down on the pots and pans, and cook she said she should swoond, and we said, 'Oh, don't,' and Jane and Sarah and Toby began to cry. I didn't cry. I said '*Jão*'—out as loud as I could—'*Jão Budmash*,' and he jaoed direckly. Servants is so helpless."

"What does he mean?" his father said. "Boys, were you in?"

"No," Fabian answered ; "we were out."

"Go, on, Harold ; what next?"

"What next? Oh, nothing next. Cook said, 'Drat 'em.' I said, 'Who's he?' and she put a brush up the chimbley, but there wasn't nobody catched it, and that's all, only the servants said they was all of a tremble, and cook said it must have been Old Nick. He's a cousin of theirs, I think ; they've got lots of cousins ; they have."

Toby sat cuddled up on his mother's knee, hardly understanding what was said. He nodded and smiled at his little brother, admiring his flow of words, and then he begged his mother to put him to bed, as it was Christmas.

"And I'll ask Ann what it was," Mrs. Vernon said, as she carried the little fellow away.

The maids were very reticent. Some drops of wet had come down the kitchen chimney, they admitted ; but cook had bad *nerves*, and a little sleet was falling at the time.

"Much ado about nothing," Mr. Vernon said, and dismissed the subject as a romance of Harold's.

The family party at dinner was increased by Mr. Doughty, the curate, and an elderly cousin of Mrs. Vernon's, "an old Johnny," as Will described him; and the boys decided he would do for one of the aunts—might cut old Truman out—an idea which particularly amused them. Poor Isoline's long-drawn-out engagement was always a subject for amusement with her thoughtless nephews. The elderly sisters looked remarkably well in most becoming evening dress, their white necks and shapely arms especially pleasing Harold, who, after staring at them for some time, asked if they were not going to finish dressing before they had their dinner.

Aunt Isoline blushed at the imputation of being too scantily clothed. She was looking quite young, and the soft, happy light in her eyes was an additional charm. Her brother told her she did not look a bit older since the last Christmas they spent together twelve years ago, and he kissed her under the mistletoe, saying, mischievously, she might fancy it was somebody else. Mrs. Lancing was happy to have her *protégé* beside her. He was a muscular Christian indeed, a big, broad young man, with a young, open face, and a mouth ready to laugh at every little joke, and display two rows of exquisitely even teeth. He was telling Mrs. Vernon how bad his chilblains were, and how painful it was to have to wear heavy boots as soon as he got up in the dark, cold mornings, and limp off to church with feet swelled from the warmth of the night. He was so boyish and so confiding. Yet he was a great authority with the school on all matters of football and cricket, and no sports were held in the neighborhood without ensuring his presence. He was the special admiration of the Vernon boys, particularly of George; and though he disclaimed it, George always insisted that the curate's supervision of his work was the cause of his success at school.

Mrs. Vernon was very sympathetic about his chilblains.

"Poor fellow!" Mrs. Lancing exclaimed, looking at his disfigured fingers. "My dear boy used to have them dreadfully. William, don't you think my poor boy would have been very like Mr. Doughty—just his build, you know—just such another athletic figure?"

Mr. Doughty generally changed the subject when these comparisons were made. They were pathetic, but they were ridiculous.

also, and he brought up another question which was even more embarrassing.

"What were you fellows doing among the chimney-pots this afternoon?" he asked. "Catching colds or appetites? I thought of fetching an ambulance to be in readiness. Those gold buttons, Fabian, looked brilliant in the sunset glare."

"What?"

"My dear boys!" So spoke father and mother.

The boys' eyes were fixed on their plates.

"What is all this?" Mr. Vernon repeated, at once guessing the connection between this revelation and the scare in the kitchen.

"William, be good enough to answer me. Is it possible you were so foolish?"

"I went up to take care of the others."

"Oh, indeed."

"There was no danger at all," Fabian added, gaining courage as he saw the twinkles in his father's eyes.

"At all events you need not have wasted my wine, and spoiled cook's bread-sauce," his father said. "I wondered what was wrong with it. Consider yourselves scolded in her stead, and don't play such monkey tricks again."

"Sorry I spoke," the curate said, in a stage whisper, while Aunt Isoline, anxious to spare the culprits, reminded her brother how they had tobogganed down the stable roof once.

"What a good idea," Dalrymple cried. "We'll try that, Fabian!"

After dinner the drawing room was cleared for dancing, and old Mrs. Vernon struck up the dance music of her girlhood, the good old-fashioned, inspiriting, tuneful quadrilles, the old *deux temps* waltz, the graceful *celarius*, and the difficult *mazurka*—tunes dear to her children's childhood. They would have none other, though the boys and Mr. Doughty privately voted them barbarous, and were unable to accommodate their steps to such music, and danced with a determination and enjoyment refreshing to behold. Then Mr. Vernon insisted his mother should dance, too, and the curate was found to be a good hand at Sir Roger de Coverley; and the "Mighty Lord of the Province" found himself once more dancing with his mother as he had danced with her in his stripling days, while his own striplings followed in his rear, cutting absurd antics, *complimenting* him upon his steps, and otherwise subjecting him to *familiarities* only permissible at Christmas. The curate was

further found to be able to sing the comic songs of the period, and Mrs. Lancing, after the first shock, applauded him as loudly as did the rest. Each boy next volunteered with less success, and then Aunt Isoline rendered the modern Chopin according to her lights, and sang some ballads—sentimental, of course—so feelingly and sweetly it was easy to know they embodied the tenderness of her own faithful heart.

A full hour before it had been ordered, a cab came for the town ladies, with a note from Aunt Jane, saying she could not possibly compose herself to sleep till she knew everyone was at home, therefore she begged they would return at once, as she was very sleepy.

With the obedience of long years of unselfish devotion, Mrs. Vernon and her daughters were eager to start at once, notwithstanding the entreaties of all around.

"Your father wouldn't like us to put her out," the elder lady said, as her son stretched his long form against the drawing-room door; "and we've had a lovely evening, my dear boy. Let us go, now, and we'll have another jollification on New Year's Eve."

"Grandmamma talking slang," Dimple cried; and so with kisses and laughter and much wrapping up, they were allowed to go.

The cousin and the curate remained to smoke, and the three elder boys were allowed to remain up, too, and listen to the stories of tiger-hunts and Thug-hunting and Dacoit-hunting, told by the elder men. Mr. Doughty showed keen interest in the *shikaree* anecdotes, and Mr. Lee expressed his surprise a young man of his powerful physique should be content to be a peaceful parson.

The curate laughed. "I have a brother in an East London parish," he said, "who owes much of his influence for good over his parishioners to his health and strength. I could show you wilder beasts in the slums he works in—wilder human beasts—than you could show me in India and Burmah. There are no such perils in the jungles as there are there. He has had many a hard stand-up fight, hand-to-hand, in his mission room; indeed, part of his training for his post was necessarily the art of self-defence—might has as much to do as right in his diggings. *Peaceful* parsons must be content to rusticate."

"Then what are *you* about so far from the strife you seem to admire?"

The color flushed his boyish face, while he answered, with an air

of modesty, "I am learning to fight myself before I presume to judge others. I hope to go and help my brother in time."

"That's a brave fellow in more ways than one," Mr. Lee said admiringly, as they closed the front door on the curate. "Boys, he read us all a sermon there unconsciously, didn't he?"

As Dalrymple turned out his gas before getting into bed, he said emphatically to George, who shared his room :

"I'll say this much for this Christmas Day, I'd never wish to eat more nor to have nicer grub. I don't think I shall ever be hungry again." And George endorsed the sentiment, adding that he had watched the banker visibly swelling at dinner.

The feast continued over the next day, when the Marleons and Holroyds came down to luncheon, glad to escape London on Boxing Day.

With the large hospitality peculiar to the old-fashioned Anglo-Indians, Mr. and Mrs. Vernon had insisted that the children should accompany their parents, and as the three families all met together at the station and walked together through the town, they might have been mistaken for a party of Cook's excursionists, as Mr. Marleon said. The young people went ahead of the elders, the Holroyd and the younger Vernon boys regarding each other askance and dragging behind the girls, while William and Fabian marched beside the young ladies and made facetious remarks on the streets they passed through by way of putting them at their ease. The three Marleons went awkwardly along, tittering and blushing and uttering an "Oh, I say," occasionally, while Flossy and Fanny Holroyd walked like well-drilled soldiers, with "eyes front" and apathetic countenances, till they came opposite Lightup's window, when they made a deliberate stop.

All the other shops in that street were shut ; but Lightup knew well a Bank Holiday made people prodigal, and he always reaped a harvest on such days. His window displayed his best dainties in bright profusion, and few holiday folk could resist the appeal. To the London girls, accustomed to the ordinary confectioner, who scorns peppermints and toffees, this show was magnetic and irresistible, and William, who saw Annie behind the counter, as radiantly dressed as her father's window, was overwhelmed with vexation and confusion as his companions stood loudly admiring.

"Almond toffee ! Oh !" cried Flossy ; "and clove cushions !" added Fanny, while the Marleon girls pushed up and looked over *the others' shoulders*, debating with each other as to an immediate

investment, and in their haste to see, William was hustled close up against the glass, he and Annie exactly opposite each other. The remainder of the party were, fortunately for William, very quickly on the scene, the gentlemen laughing at the attraction, the mothers of the girls inclined to be angry.

"As vulgar as it is greedy!" Mrs. Marleon exclaimed to her three girls, who, on her appearance, immediately subsided into their normal awkward silence.

"So ridiculously childish," added Mrs. Holroyd. "What terrible inflictions schoolgirls are!" she continued. "Has my husband told you our new plans? Our eldest boy is going out to a cousin of ours in Texas, to learn farming; the other will remain at school another year, and then go out also; and eventually they will buy land and work for themselves. Fanny will go back to school, too, and Florence will accompany us to Italy for finishing lessons and to be polished altogether. Then I shall send her out to my sister in Calcutta, where she'll have a chance of marrying well. I want to do all I can for them all."

"And do they all agree to this?"

"My dear Mrs. Vernon, of course they must agree. Florence is very pretty; she ought to make her way; then I shall give Fanny the same advantages and chance; and then we, too, shall be able to think of our own comfort."

Meanwhile Mr. Marleon and Mr. Vernon had made large purchases of sweets, and, overtaking the girls, presented their offerings.

"You should have seen the girl who served us," said unconscious Mr. Marleon, addressing William. "She gave herself the air of a conscious beauty; a ring the size of a turnip adorned her hand; she *is* a caution."

"My ring—his ring—our ring!" George murmured; while his father remarked that Annie Lightup was a local beauty, little short of a goddess to the schoolboys. "So was her aunt before her," he added; and then he repeated the little reminiscence already narrated in these pages.

Florence Holroyd talked to William quite confidentially as they paced on together a little in advance. His budding mustaches, his careful dress, and his politeness impressed her very favorably. She let him see she considered him the young man of the party, and spoke of the rest as "all these children." She told him of her *former home in Streatham* with relations who considered the theatre

wicked, and never allowed any books except sermons to be read on a Sunday ; and, as she talked, she bridled and simpered, and played with a highly scented pocket-handkerchief.

"But all that is over now," she added. "I am going abroad with papa and mamma ; won't it be heavenly ? You are going into a stuffy bank, aren't you ?"

"Well, as to a bank," Bill replied, feeling sore at her flippant words, "a fellow must do something ; and I'm the dunce of the family, I suppose. A bank will do just for a beginning, you know ; it's good practice."

"You'll be a junior partner, I suppose ?"

"Oh, no !" he said, with a little laugh at her ignorance ; "at least, not at first."

"One of the Streatham boys is at a bank—a mere clerk ; wears a topper in the morning, and all that sort of thing. I can't understand mamma leaving us there. Just think, if anything had happened !"

"How do you mean ?"

"Well, suppose—you know—suppose he and I had taken a fancy to each other ? What a dreadful come-down, for my father's daughter to marry a bank clerk !"

Bill's laugh was an uneasy one ; yet he had the sense to see her lack of it.

"If a fellow liked a girl—I mean, if a girl liked a fellow, she wouldn't think—I mean mind—about his position."

"No," she said doubtfully ; "but of course one must consider one's people. Oh, is this your house ? How nice ! I hope Fan has not eaten all the clove cushions."

William forgot his budding mustaches, and Florence forgot her years, after luncheon, when the young people were left to themselves, while the elders had their own talk in the drawing room. The sweets were made common property, and the atmosphere was presently full of the odor of peppermint ; the girls and the boys were no longer shy of each other, and the three Marleons showed they were as noisy and slangy as any schoolboy. Each had some special talent—the noble art of whistling having been brought to great perfection by Urania, while Titania could dance the "Perfect Cure" for ten minutes without "turning a hair," as she presently demonstrated ; and Constantia could put her thumb out of joint, touch her toes without bending her knees, and kiss *the wall* behind her while her heels remained stationary against

the wainscot. Here were talents indeed ! George and Dalrymple were amazed girls could do so much, and Flossy and her sister were filled with envy. Next, Fabian danced the sailor's hornpipe in and out among twelve of the best wineglasses, and only broke five, which was held to be extraordinarily smart practice. One of the Holroyd boys played nigger melodies with his fingers on his cheeks, and the other gave "Home, Sweet Home" on his teeth. Dalrymple, after much pressing, stood on his head, with a decanter on each upturned foot, till his face grew dangerously purple, and the decanters showed signs of slipping off. Then George, having laid himself stiff on the floor, rose up presently, without bending any part of his body, to his feet, straight as a ramrod.

Flossy proposed games after these exhibitions ; one called, "The Postman's Knock," being specially liked. The Marleons showed themselves equal in original inventive talent in games also, and initiated their companions into a new Sunday game, which culminated in such commotion as to cause an irruption from the drawing room, when Urania was discovered upon the dining table as a good angel, and Titania under the table as a bad angel, each doing her best to capture the young people, who raced round and round within arm's length.

Luckily for them, it was Mrs. Vernon who appeared on the scene of action, and she rejoiced in the shouts of mirth and the flushed faces, and only feared the girls would be too tired. She did not see the broken wineglasses.

They made quite a sensation at the station, where they all congregated, waiting for the train. There was no staring in silence at each other by this time ; indeed, most of them were all talking at once. The Marleon girls told Mrs. Vernon it had been the jolliest day they had ever spent, and would she try and persuade mamma to come and live near them ? They kissed her effusively, too, and declared she was "a dear." And Mrs. Vernon, pleased with their gratitude and offended with their manners, yet preferred their enthusiasm to the conceited, cut-and-dried speech of Florence Holroyd, whose "So many thanks for asking us !" sounded as if the favor was all on the speaker's side.

A return visit was promised by the Vernons to the Holroyds on New Year's Day, but two events happened within a week. First, Fabian was ordered to join her Majesty's flagship *Bullet* "at once" ; and William's examination papers were returned with the curt remark "*Ineligible.*"

It was a bitter moment for poor William, though his incapability had been proved before in other examinations, for he had so condescended in applying for a bank clerkship, and all his friends had laughed at the notion of any young man being unable to get through the papers, yet here he was declared, even for a clerkship at thirty pounds a year, "Ineligible."

His father said no word of annoyance ; he picked up the papers and retired to his smoking room, and there inspected the reasons of the lad's failure. They were easy to find, and, even had not the Algebra and French and Latin been bad, the English spelling would have been enough. He had written an essay on the mercantile resources of Great Britain, but had not availed himself of the printed spelling. It was a monstrous piece of stupidity, his father told himself, and yet Mr. Vernon sat back in his chair and laughed till he could laugh no more as he pictured the examiner trying to discover the meaning of "The corse of Great Britain's affluence and high pershion among forren countrees."

"Bill knows how to spell better than this," Mrs. Vernon said when she came sadly to talk the matter over. "He was dreadfully nervous, I am sure. I never can spell, when I'm nervous."

"Ah, now, don't make excuses," her husband said ; "you told me only the other day you had never found any difficulty in spelling correctly ; and it isn't his spelling only. Well, never mind, he feels it greatly, I can see. I won't be hard on him, now he's down."

Will had not a word to say to anyone all that morning, but feeling the benefit of luncheon, he ventured out afterward and received comfort from his friends, the majority of whom, to his astonishment, received the news of his defeat as a matter of course. Some were obliging enough to say he was well out of a beggarly thing, and it would have been a "bad bargain for both sides." Yet these were the very friends who had so short a time before declared his prospects brilliant.

Fabian's dash and side left him entirely when he said good-by. It had been hard enough to say it to the tiresome old great-aunt who yet was his old, old great-aunt, part of his life, to the kind, merry grandmother and the much-enduring aunts. It had been distressing to see Smith and the other servants weep ; but all that was as nothing to parting from the nearer and dearer. His mother's face *all stained with tears*, her fevered, trembling hands, her fervent *blessing*, as he at last ran away, were more than he could bear, and

regardless of his father's presence as they journeyed together to Portsmouth, he cried like a child.

So in presence of this greater trial, William's failure met with less reproach and sorrow than it would have done under ordinary circumstances.

"I wouldn't be a bit sorry, if I were you," Annie Lightup said. "Couldn't you be some kind of a soldier that don't need exams? There's the yeomanry—as dashing a set as anyone can see; and even the volunteers aint bad; some of them have lovely regimentals. Ask your pa to make you an allowance; he's rich enough, and you are the eldest son and heir, and go in for a horse soldier of the yeomanry."

He called her a little goose; but he liked to be called the heir of a rich man, empty though the words were.

CHAPTER IX

WILL'S PROSPECTS

ON Mr. Vernon's return from seeing Fabian off, he set himself seriously to consider in what direction his eldest boy's talents lay.

William had no idea himself. He "thought he should like to take Holy Orders." But then, he added, "Perhaps the University expenses would be beyond his father's means."

"That might be managed," was his father's answer, not unkindly spoken; "but wouldn't the University papers be rather above your means?"

Poor William, he had not thought of anything but having a fine time at college. "Grandmother said I ought to be a doctor, and settle here," he added presently. "I suppose it's too late for me to try now; beside, I never could bear the dissecting, I'm quite sure."

"It's dirty work, too," Mr. Vernon said sarcastically. "Well, but try and think what to try for next. Soldier, banker, parson, are each beyond you; we've proved that pretty conclusively, eh? You can't go behind a counter, because you'd have to spell in making out the bills; you are not fit for colonization. Can you suggest anything else?"

Will moved uneasily. He thought of Annie's absurd suggestion, and it chased away any other.

"I really can't, sir," he said at last. "I wish you would find something for me, and I promise you I'll do my best."

"I might get something in India. I can suggest nothing else."

"In India!"

"Well, why not in India? Better fellows than you and I are have made their mark in India."

"To leave home so soon. Mother and everyone. India!"

Mr. Vernon rose, angrily pushing his chair petulantly backward. "There, there," he cried; "a mother's baby at nineteen! Hasn't your brother, years your junior, gone off for three years? Didn't I go off, at sixteen, too? You'd be with *me*. I'm not asking you to start off to a land of savages. Bless me, what is the fellow made of?"

Will looked such a picture of dismay as he leaned back staring at his father, his handsome boyish face drawn and white, that Mr. Vernon's anger went as quickly as it had risen. What a child the boy was! an irresponsible child; he thought anger would be thrown away on him; it would frighten, not nerve him to action. So he sat down again, and did his best to be patient. "I have no connection in England to get anything that would suit you," he said. "In India it is different. I am well known there, and in such a position that I can occasionally ask a favor as if I were conferring one; mind you, a favor due to my standing. If I took you out, I have no doubt I should find someone able or willing to employ you; but I could not, indeed, I will not, foist you on anyone under false pretences."

"How do you mean?"

"I mean that from now until my leave is up, you must work hard to get up some sort of knowledge. You have your senses; you must use them to some purpose. I'm willing to give you a tutor, but only on your solemn promise that you will work with him."

"You'll let me think it over?"

"Think it over, by all means, and think this over, too, that I will not keep you in idleness any longer; it's bad for you and unfair to all the rest. If I were a rich man, and could leave you all wealth, I would still insist on each following a profession. No man is fit to spend money till he has learned how to earn it. I can't see what you'll have to think over."

Will thought of Annie, and was silent.

"However," continued Mr. Vernon, "I'll wait for your answer till after breakfast to-morrow."

And Will went away full of conflicting thoughts.

As an engaged man, he told himself he was not at liberty to do entirely what he chose ; he began to ask himself with some disquietude whether he was bound, or how far he was bound, to consult and to abide by Annie's wishes. In theory it was pleasant to be "an engaged man"; in practice it placed him in an awkward position. Supposing she could not bear to let him go so far away, would it be his duty to consider her wishes before his father's? He was past nineteen—legally eligible for matrimony—ought he to marry her privately, and so be able to have her out as soon as he could pay her passage? A few months ago, before his mother's return, the idea of a private marriage had appeared delightful—such a romantic notion, such a manly, meritorious action, a second King Cophetua and the beggar maiden—not that Annie was in any respect a beggar ; still he felt, and liked to feel, that as his wife she would be considerably raised above her original station. But gradually the companionship of his refined and intelligent mother, and the intercourse with her friends, had made him feel the more than class distinction between them and Annie Lightup. In the greater familiarity of the engagement, Annie's little vulgarities had not been kept under as in the days when she was not sure of her conquest, and his ears, better tuned to the gentleness and sweetness of a refined voice, were now often shocked by the coarseness and pertness of her talk, before unnoticed. Still not for an instant had he yet repented of his folly nor even allowed himself to question her perfection, and he did not now hesitate long to ask her opinion, though whether that opinion must be decisive for him or not remained doubtful.

The afternoon was bitterly cold ; snow had been falling since the past night, but the temperature was rapidly falling, and the snow thinning as the frost increased in severity. The little boys' faces were glued to the window in keen watchfulness, for much depended on the weather. A river carnival had been organized for the evening, and if the snow continued, it would be shorn of its beauty. George and Dalrymple kept going off to reconnoitre, and coming in covered with snow. Even Mr. and Mrs. Vernon were excited ; in their youth both had been good skaters, and they anticipated with almost youthful ardor once more indulging in the long discontinued pleasure. Will had bought the newest and best skates for his mother, and had prepared her boots ; he had been as *keenly interested in her attempt* as she was herself ; but since the

interview with his father a deeper chord of interest had been struck, and the coming carnival for the moment shrank into the background. Toward dusk the heavy gray clouds lifted on the western horizon, and a line of gorgeous orange-colored brightness shot out over the snow-covered earth ; the level glory flashed into the eyes of the little lads, making them call out in delight for their mother to come and admire it with them.

Bill rose up from his unwonted thought to bask in the cheering light also.

"It's all right now," he cried ; " we shall have a splendid night." And then the three elder lads went off with their father to see how preparations progressed on the river.

Hundreds of men and boys were already there sweeping away the snow from the steel-blue frozen water, hanging the trees on the banks with Chinese lanterns, putting up stalls for refreshments, and bringing forms for fitting on skates. Gangs of men were at work clearing the embankment of snow, and bringing down fantastic hand-sleighs and push-alongs for the convenience of those who could not skate and feared to walk.

Later on, when the clouds had cleared, and the stars hung out from the deep blue sky, when the wind had dropped, and the banks of snow had become hard as blocks of marble in the keen air, the whole population seemed to have come down to the river to enjoy the unusual spectacle. It was worth seeing the broad deep river, with its embankment reaching away on either side of the town, arrested in its flow and thronged with people ; the great stone bridge outlined with lights above and below, and crowded with spectators ; the skaters, mostly dressed in characters more or less funny, and having lamps attached to their belts ; the Japanese lanterns hung in festoons from tree to tree, or from poles where trees failed, so that the sidewalks resembled illuminated arcades and turned the winter's night into a scene of fairylike beauty ; the houses on either side brilliantly illuminated to add to the general brightness, and the good-tempered throng of people, of all ages and classes, pushing, slipping, sliding, skating, exchanging salutations, whistling, singing, shouting, talking, accompanied by the never ceasing sound of the skates, with the pulses throbbing and the blood heating with the violent exercise, and the cheeks and eyes brightening in the fresh, rarefied air.

Harold and Toby, clothed like little Polar bears, and protected by as many servants as could be spared, were in the thick of all the

bustle. Every now and then George, or one of his schoolfellows, would come swiftly up and take one of them off for a brief skirmish among the skaters, or papa would carry them away for a rapid run between him and their mother. Aunt Isoline was on skates, too ; so was Mr. Doughty. Indeed, the little boys were constantly recognizing parts of the ever changing, ever hurrying crowd. Grandmamma was there in a push-along, in charge of either her tall son or one of her grandsons. Aunt Gertrude was not there. She had volunteered to sit by a bedridden old man while his son and daughter disported themselves on the ice. She did not care "to bump up against Dick, Tom, and Harry," she told the curate ; "but for those who had chilblains it was good, and she should certainly have encouraged Leonard in it."

Young Mrs. Vernon skated to perfection—so said the people whose opinion was the most worth having, the Grammar-school masters—her slender, graceful figure swaying with her steps, her bright face no longer pinched and lemon colored. Her happy, cordial tones freshly captivated these impressionable young men. Years fell from the husband and wife as they enjoyed the old sport and felt the old charm of skimming over the ice ; with the keen air striking their heated faces, the old figures long unthought of were traced with the old ease on the glistening river, in and out, now on this edge of the skate, now on the other, to the admiration of the beholders, till from sheer fatigue they were reluctantly compelled to desist.

When they had gone home, William joined Annie Lightup, who had been placing herself in his way several times during the evening, but whom he had not dared to notice while so many of his family were about. When at last he went to her, she was rather inclined to be huffy, and wondered why "those young ladies he had brought to stare at her through the window were not with him."

"Stare at you !" he cried.

"Oh, yes ; as if I couldn't understand ; but I think it was very ungenteel. If you wanted them to know me, you might have come in and introduced them properly. I aint a show."

"My dear Annie, as if I'd do such a thing ! They were looking at the sweets ; I couldn't help myself. It was horrible, I thought ; but they are schoolgirls, and so of course they love sweets."

"It was very ungenteel," she continued ; "calling themselves ladies, too ! Why,"—and she laughed sarcastically,—*"I never saw*

such hats—not a bit of feather nor flower among them ! Which is the favored one ? ”

“ Don’t be silly—a parcel of schoolgirls ! ”

“ One was near as tall as you—a bold-faced thing, no earrings and no bracelets ”—and she jingled a dozen plated bangles on her wrist. “ Nothing that I should call style at all—frights, I call them ! But there, it wouldn’t do if we all thought alike. ”

While they spoke, they had gradually edged off from the friends with whom she had stood, and gained a part of the embankment left unlighted.

“ Oh, leave them alone, ” he urged, putting his arm in hers, and quickening his pace onward away from the lights.

“ Oh, I don’t want to know them. Only if you saw me flirting with a lot of young fellows, you’d—— ”

“ Punch their heads ! ” he cried, with a laugh.

“ It’s no laughing matter, ” she continued. “ Love and jealousy aint nothing to make merry over. I’d rather dig a hole in the ice, I would, and go under, than be fooled, I would. ”

She had wrought herself up into real distress, and Will had to swear and to vow, and to entreat and to implore, before she would accept his assurances of undying fidelity, and was able to hear what he had to tell concerning his future plans.

Then she jumped at once from the depths of despair to the height of delight.

To go to India—what a vision of show and grandeur was in the mere idea—to live where no one would know of the sweet-shop ; but where, as Mrs. Vernon, she would be a lady among ladies, to ride on an elephant, and to keep a carriage ; to have a black man with a long fan to fan her, while she did nothing ; to be surrounded by officers in gay “ regimentals ” ; to order, instead of being ordered, were but a few of the possibilities his words brought before her impulsive imagination. What he would be, and how she would achieve this delightful imagining, were commonplaces unnecessary to consider. If his father was a commander-in-chief, as Mrs. Smith had said, or even if he was only as grand as a commander-in-chief, without the rank, why, then, it went without saying that his son would become something of the same sort, and she, as his wife, would share his grandeur ; but all she said to her lover was :

“ Well, I never ! ”

Her words conveyed nothing of the commotion of her mind, and Will asked again :

"What do you think I must do?"

As she spoke, someone passing by on the inner side of the tree-bordered walk turned quickly round to look after the speaker. But, bright as was the starlight, it was not bright enough to let him identify the two dark figures so closely drawn together, though they were but a few yards distant. As he stood wondering, the sharper voice of the girl floated clearly to him.

"O Will," it said, "wouldn't it be magnificent to live in the glowing Orient?"

"Where did you pick up that phrase?" her companion asked with a laugh, and then the man listening in the shade turned swiftly away in the opposite direction, as if detected in a crime.

Poor Mr. Vernon! he had left his wife at his mother's house, and come back for one more run on his skates, and to collect his big boys, and all unconsciously had become possessed of Will's secret.

The young couple wandered on, discussing the unwearying question in perfect unconsciousness of the danger ahead, and as Annie rattled on, Will was inclined to be angry, because she evidently thought so little of the impending separation. It was of the benefit to herself, of the gayety and ease for herself, that was too apparent; indeed, she took too much for granted—and he could not altogether refrain from saying what was in his mind.

"It may be years before I can have you out, you know," he exclaimed, and then she, with the quick intuition of her sex, saw her mistake, and made haste to rectify it.

"Years? O Will, I shan't never come out to you, then. As if I can go on living without seeing you for years! There's your aunt, to be sure, *she* does; but, then, she's gone quite scraggy over it, and her man isn't like you, Will."

This was balm to him, and he was good enough to assure her he should make his pile as quickly as possible, so as to be able to provide himself with the dearest little wife in the world.

"And I shall write you such nice long letters," he added.

"Letters aint you," she murmured, which was still more gratifying to Will, who felt fonder of Annie when she was away from contrasts, and her eccentric hat was shadowed in the kindly dusk.

It was altogether a happy walk to both, though separation was *their topic*. He had proved himself equal to his duty as an engaged

man, had consulted her wishes, and when they parted, on the outskirts of the throng of sightseers, he told her he should tell his father he was willing to go to India.

As he left her, and ran up the lane leading from the riverside, he knocked up against his father.

"Halloa, papa!" he cried. "You here? I thought you went away long ago."

As he spoke, they went on together toward home.

"So I did; but I came back again. What girl were you walking with, William?"

The unexpected enquiry staggered the lad; he felt as if his head was spinning round, and his ears were full of the sound of clashing water. For an instant he could not answer, but his silence was from sheer inability to form a sound, not from the slightest intention to deceive. The words came at last—just her name—no more.

"I am glad you speak the truth like a man," Mr. Vernon said, "for I recognized her by her voice."

He put his arm in his son's as he spoke, and threw away his cigar.

"But to say the least of it, it is bad form for a young man in our class to walk about with a shop-girl, let alone the wrong you may be doing the girl."

"Wrong, father?"

"Yes, wrong. She's just the silly, affected girl to get hold of notions which cannot be fulfilled; so she'll turn from decent workmen in her own class, and think herself above them, and all because you amused yourself with her for a while."

"I am not amusing myself."

"Well, no, I don't suppose there's much amusement to be had; still, schoolboys have queer tastes. Anyhow, you must drop such acquaintances now you are almost a man. Never be intimate with a person you dare not walk with in broad daylight, my son. That's a text which will always keep you from undesirable companions."

Will longed to confess all. It seemed almost easy while he could not see his father's face, and while the cold sharp air braced his mind and body; and yet he was withheld by the tone his father took. It would be like firing a bomb to announce the fact that he proposed, as soon as possible, to make Annie Lightup his wife.

"*And I wonder,*" Mr. Vernon went on to say, "Jim Lightup

doesn't look better after his daughter. He can't have forgotten how his sister almost lost her reputation by her silly, flirty ways. If Annie Lightup was a modest, well-conducted girl, she wouldn't stroll about with you or any lad in the dark."

Every word made Will's confession less possible.

"She was out to see the carnival. Her friends were near," was all he could say in defence of his future wife.

They were walking fast, and getting very near home, and as they reached their gate, he added :

"You need not tell mamma, sir."

Mr. Vernon hesitated, and slackened his step.

"I won't tell her," he replied, "on condition you give me your word that in future you will have nothing to say to this nor any other girl you cannot introduce to her."

At that instant Dalrymple flew up after them.

"There's that beast, Steed minor!" he said breathlessly, "trying to catch me."

"What are you doing out so late?"

"I couldn't find any of you!" he cried; "and Steed declared you were all still skating. I hate that Steed minor!"

"Well, go in quick! Now then, Will, let's have it. Am I to shock your mother, or will you promise me?"

"There's no other girl, papa, I declare."

"I'm very glad to hear it. And you promise me to have nothing further to say to Jim Lightup's daughter, on condition I say nothing to your mother?"

For the moment there flashed up before Will's mental vision his mother and his sweetheart side by side—the one refined and beautiful, with unconscious dignity; the other aggressively commonplace, and beaming with vulgar self-complacency—and he could not shock the mother who was to him the embodiment of sweetness and purity. So he weakly gave the required promise; and as he followed his father into the house, after the emphatic "I am quite satisfied, William," the meanness of what he had promised made him feel the veriest sneak.

Dimple was seated in the warm well-lighted dining room, pouring out the story of Steed minor's faults and his own sufferings into his mother's sympathetic ears; while George, who was taking down big spoonfuls of hot soup, made running comments. Mrs. Vernon was divided between her desire to comfort her smaller boy and her inability to avoid laughing at her big boy. The

appearance of her husband and eldest son made a welcome diversion. She was sure they were frozen and hungry, and made that loving fuss over them, till they were seated and refreshed, that is so pleasant to the weary. In the warmth and kindness and mirth, Will was comforted. He would keep his promise, he told himself; he would give Annie up, and never speak to her again, rather than see his mother's face turned from him in disgust.

He told George afterward, and George exclaimed, "Well, I'm blowed!" as Will ended with saying he had promised not to walk with Annie again.

"It's a howling caddish thing, I swear!" George continued. "I've always thought you an ass to be taken in by that dressed-out doll, but I thought you were man enough to stick to her; and if you are sick of her, you ought to tell her so, and not sneak out of it by being cuts."

"I never said I was sick of her, and I mean to get you to tell her how father found us out, and——"

"I swear I won't do your dirty work. You'd better write; only do mind the spelling, lest it should come into court."

"I shall let her keep the ring," said Will, taking no offence at the plain speaking; "it's worth sixteen bob—more than I am, at this present time—and I'll promise her half my next quarter's allowance, and she may keep the little bits of jewelry I've given her; but it will be very awkward being cuts, for no one else in Cotley gives such good weight as the Lightups."

"Oh, I say!" George cried, apostrophizing mankind in general. "Who do you expect would dare to go and insult her with all this rot? If she sold that ring at so much a pound, even then it wouldn't make much. Why, she'd scratch a fellow's eyes out as soon as not; but you'd better ask for all those precious letters of yours, or she'll be showing them round."

Will had very little sleep that night. His poor father lay long awake, also; he had not the benefit of sharing his doubts with his wife, and so gaining ease, and as he thought it all over in the soundless night, he saw another meaning in Will's answers and hesitations. He could hardly imagine his handsome boy losing his heart to such a girl; and yet how many and many an even less likely woman had fascinated even experienced men of the world! He blamed himself for not being more brotherly and less fatherly, for *not having* persuaded him to make a clean breast of it, *if* it went *beyond the amusement of the hour*; and the more he thought the

matter out, with side-lights flashing up from the past, the more he felt there was more to be fathomed.

He was out before breakfast in the morning, and went, as he often did, to greet his mother on his way back from his usual constitutional.

Smith answered the door, greeting her old nursling with effusion.

"It does one's eyes good to see you, Master William; there's hardly a day but the old missis and me reckons up how soon you'll be off again, and neither she nor me can expect to see you again."

"Much obliged to you. Perhaps I'd better take my coffin out with me, then."

"Ah, you must have your joke; but she's past ninety, and I'm past seventy. Neither of us can't be considered great shakes."

"Past seventy, Smith! Nonsense! Fifty, you mean. A woman's only as old as she looks. You look fifty."

"Get along with you, sir. You was always romantical, like Master Bill; he's the very fact smily of you at that age."

Mr. Vernon was standing just inside the front door; the door of the inner hall being shut, no one could overhear them.

"Ah! about Master Bill," he said, dropping his voice. "Can you tell me if he goes after Jim Lightup's daughter?"

She looked keenly at him. "Don't fear," he added: "you won't get him into trouble. Just answer, there's a good soul."

"More like she runs after him, chitty-faced minx!"

"Well, be it so. You and I are old friends; many's the scrape you've helped me out of. Now, I have an idea he's got himself into a scrape with that girl, like a foolish boy as he is. What do you know about it?"

"The poor dear boy! It's only what lots of young gentlemen do; it's only calf love, sir. I'd take no notice of it."

"What do you know about it?"

He was no longer her bantering old nursling, but her master, asking for information he intended to have.

"What makes you ask me, sir?"

"I can't ask anyone else without raising a hue and cry. I can reckon upon your silence to everyone else. You can't do my boy a greater kindness than by telling me what you know."

"He's been keeping company with her for the last year, more or less. She boasts about her fine prospects to my noodle of a niece. I told her she'd best not associate one of my young gentlemen with

Jim's girl. I gave her a hearing, sir. She'll not open her lips about it no more."

"What fine prospects does she mean?"

"Why, look yer, sir, she thinks he'll marry her."

"Does she? How do they propose to live?"

"'Marry her, indeed!' I said; 'Master Bill 'll have five or six fancy girls before he gets to love one enough to marry,' I said; 'and his wife 'll have to be a lady born and bred,' I said."

"Why didn't you tell me all this? Does my mother know?"

"Least said soonest mended, I always think, sir. Don't you notice it, and it 'll die out of itself; melling of a thing increases its importance. No, sir, your ma don't know, nor Miss Isadore, nor Miss Gertrude. The old missis got hold of something one day; but she forgets quickly nowadays, or thinks she dreamed it."

"Do the Lightups encourage it?"

"He don't, but Ann Lightup is a poor foolish woman. She was one of them Tranders, you know, sir, who went to London when she was a baby—poor sort of folks; and Mrs. Jim she thinks her girl is cut out for a lady. But I don't think she reckons on Master Bill keeping his word—she has sense enough to remember his years. You get him away and give him something to do, sir, and he'll soon forget."

He put his hand kindly on her. "You always were a comfort, Smith," he said, "and 'boys will be boys' was your favorite excuse when we deserved scolding. Maybe it is best to treat it with silent contempt. But I do trust the poor fellow won't suffer."

"Suffer, Mr. William! I can think me of the time when you thought yourself broken-hearted once or twice, before Miss Amy Lavender was in long frocks. You are in very good preservation, after it all, sir!"

The inner door was opened just then, and Mrs. Vernon peeped out.

"What! you there in the cold, my dear boy? Smith, why don't you let him in quickly? This cold is killing."

Smith chuckled, and Mr. Vernon stepped into the warm dining-room after his mother.

"Now, Smith, quick with the coffee!" Isoline cried, starting from her chair to greet her brother. "O Will! don't you wish *yourself* back in the land of the sun?"

"Don't I just! I want Amy to come off to the south of France

before we are frozen up entirely, but she won't leave her boys. I think she'd sooner let me go alone."

"I dare say! There's only one person Amy likes better than her boys, and that's you, and you know it."

He made a grimace to hide the well-pleased smile with which he received his mother's speech.

"But really," he said, "I don't know how I'm to live through this cold and gloom. We are using tons of coals a day, too, and the rooms are like ice half a yard away from the fire; but our rooms are just traps for draughts. I dare say the builder and the coal merchant are partners."

No, he would not be tempted with hot coffee; he must go home and read his letters. There would be half a dozen, no doubt, from mothers of bad boys, and mothers of stupid boys, who, probably, had only met him once years ago, or else who knew someone who knew him.

"'Pon my word," he added, "they seem to think it is a pleasing duty of mine to foist hard bargains on the State. They actually unblushingly ask me to give 'dear Jim something in India, to keep him away from undesirable companions in England,' or to 'find my dear boy some position of trust where there will be no brain-work to speak of.'"

"What do you say in return?"

"Well, unless the writing is very pretty, and like that of a young woman, I hit out savagely, and declare I don't keep a register and must decline further correspondence!"

"O Will! think of your own boys, who will want a helping hand. I'm sure I should have had to bother you about my Leonard," said Gertrude.

"It's because I *do* think of my boys," he cried. "Good-by; I'm off to stay with the Holroyds to-morrow for a week, unless Amy orders me home sooner."

On his breakfast table there were, just as he had surmised, letters from anxious mothers requiring immediate answers. These he tossed aside to read an official letter from the India Office, and this he read to himself twice, and then looked at his wife, and on round the table at his boys.

Mrs. Vernon was pouring out tea, her face bright with contentment. The boys were intent on their plates, every now and then conversing in low tones, not to disturb their father, last night's *amusement being*, of course, their topic, "and that ass Lowndes,

the mathematical, actually asked me to introduce him to my sister," George whispered; "and he meant mamma. He won't hear the last of that, you bet."

Will said "that mistake didn't prove him an ass," and the two argued the question till their mother burst out laughing at their folly.

Mr. Vernon coughed, and his wife's mirth ceased. She was at once sure he had taken cold last night, and as she looked at him anxiously his expression puzzled her.

"What is it?" she asked, at once connecting his appearance with the blue letter in his hand.

He drew a long breath, and gave the letter to her.

By this time the boys were all attention, and wonderingly watched the changes of her expression as she read. The light paled from the happy face as she grasped the meaning.

"O Will!" she cried.

"Well!" he answered, "you see it is not a command, only an enquiry."

"Ah! but a 'must be,' all the same," she said. "And of course you must not throw such a compliment back at them."

"That's brave, dear," he exclaimed; "just what I like you to say. And, after all, it won't lengthen our separation, though it antedates it."

"Tell the boys," she said, her voice low and broken. And then she swallowed some scalding tea, and so accounted for the tears in her eyes, while he read the letter.

The chief commissioner of Wattibuldi, the one person in the province who could take upon himself to oversee Mr. Vernon, was dead. His post was placed at Mr. Vernon's acceptance; but he must take up the office without delay.

"Which means," he said, as he put down the paper and glanced at his wife while addressing the boys, "I shall probably be off within a month. Are you ready, Bill?"

Then the general attention was fixed on Bill.

"I thought I was to work till May, sir?"

"Yes; but I can't leave you behind, if I accept this; so if I go, so must you. You can work there as well as here. But now I must catch the mail train up. It will be best to go and interview old Marsland. Will you come with me, Amy? Bill shall come, and then if I elect to accept, we can all go straight on to Allen's, and get a few necessaries. I don't want much, but Bill must get a few things."

They were back again for late dinner, and next day it was pretty well public property that the father and son were going to India, and the house was besieged by callers. But the "within a month" was quickly changed to "within a week." A telegram from Wattibuldi hastened the new commissioner out. Some petty rajah had taken offence at another petty rajah, and refused to listen to the advice of the *pro tem.* official. Mr. Vernon's well-known probity, and his great experience of the East Indian character, made his presence very desirable, to prevent the misunderstanding swelling. He received the offer of the post on Tuesday, and he promised to start with the Friday mail.

Out of the cold and gloom, out of the draughty rooms—out of the smoky coal fire's influence; but, alas! also, out of the brightness and love of home. It is well there are two sides to every question—light as well as darkness, in every day. To Mr. Vernon there was the looking forward to a return to familiar scenes, return to work, to the old life of power and position. No true man is blind and deaf to the charms of work which brings power and credit, and that upward rise among his fellows which he has honestly earned. The holiday had been pleasant enough; he had seen old friends, refreshed his mind with modern doings and amusements up to date; he had discussed the plans of his boys' further education, and seen one of them started in life; he had adjusted the business of the family generally; and now, just when he was beginning to feel family life a little bit dull, came this welcome promotion to lift him out of it.

And his wife, with unselfish devotion, was content. That is to say, she understood it was good for him,—best for him to make the most of his life—not to be willing to rest as soon as he was able to take up work again, to be eager to be a man among men, to be a man over men, if possible, and she was strong enough to acknowledge it was right; though as a woman, with a woman's oversensitive heart, she might have desired to keep him beside her. She told herself, further, it would be good for Bill to go also, though she had had him such a little time out of his nineteen years, though he was so loving and pleasant, more like a devoted daughter than a son, though his voice was music to her ears as he called for her every time he entered the house, showing she was his first thought there; and though he was such a light-hearted, good-tempered companion, never failing to like what she liked; his *companionship was delightful to her*; but she could admit it was

not sufficient for him. He wanted hardening, to enable him to face the hard world, and win his way through it. His place, as a man, must be in front; hers, as a woman, in the safer rear. He must learn to fight his way, as his father had fought valiantly, against the sloth that would incline him to ease and self-devotion, and she would forge the armor that would shield him from falling and failing by her constant prayers on his behalf. So when the watchful eyes of her husband were upon her, or the hand of her eldest son clasped hers, she smiled at them with dry eyes, and talked commonplaces respecting their preparations.

The days between the arrival of the telegram and the start passed like the wind. Mr. Vernon's boxes only needed packing—everything of his was ready in his wardrobe merely to be moved to his trunks. He was order itself; there was no scrambling nor hunting for what he required. But with Bill it was different—his possessions were so numerous he hardly knew how to choose; what to discard, what to take. His room looked like a fancy bazaar when he had collected all his belongings, and presents were poured in upon him as soon as his intended departure was known. Never a prize or distinction had he ever gained at school; his mediocrity had hardly been even respectable mediocrity. Yet from masters and "old boys," from matrons, and young and old friends, came parting gifts that showed he had gained many a heart if not many a prize, and the testimony the headmaster gave him unsolicited bore handsome witness to his moral character. Bill was to start in life with glowing colors, after all.

That last evening, when at last his boxes were packed, and a cupboard had received the overflow, he went in and out of his father's smoke-room a dozen times before he dare ask the question which would not brook delay. His father noticed his inquietude—perhaps he guessed its occasion.

"Well, Will?" he said, after a time.

Will's voice was very low and humble. "I promised I would not speak to—that girl again," he said; "but I am sure I ought to go to the shop and say good-by. All the fellows do, when they are leaving for good. It can't do any harm to say good-by, sir?"

Mr. Vernon looked fixedly at his son before replying. Then he said:

"You can go and say good-by, but only good-by. In a very *short time*, my boy, your ideas will be very greatly changed. Only *good-by, recollect.*"

He ran along the snowy road in the deepening evening light, meeting no one until the quiet suburban way joined the main thoroughfare to the town. The boys were not yet out of school ; the narrow streets were almost empty ; the business day was ended ; the traffic over. He reached the familiar shop, and had entered it before he had made up his mind how elastic that stipulated "Good-by" should be. Annie was not behind the counter—customers were not usual until the schoolboys took their homeward way ; it was too early for them, too late for others, so Annie was at work in the back parlor, trusting to her ears should her services be wanted. She knew Bill's step in an instant. She had been expecting him ever since the rumor of his going had reached her. Her silly head was full of notions, while her heart remained serene. It would be nice to get his letters, and to be important over their contents ; it would be grand to go out to him. So when his voice called now, she jumped up eagerly.

"Father is in the kitchen," she said, just showing herself in the doorway, "and mother's out. Come in here."

Will obeyed. He had no notion of doing his adieux in the lighted shop.

"Is it true," she asked, "your pa is made a radjer ? They've got it up that he is. And what will you be then ? I thought you were never coming to poor little me."

"I've only a minute, dear," he said. "We leave here to-morrow early, and sail at noon ; and you can imagine how busy we are."

"And you'll write by every post, and tell me how you are ?" Annie said, making believe to cry. "Oh, dear ! what shall I do ?"

Will was deeply distressed. He had so long admired her ; he had so determined to marry her some day, and yet his lips were sealed to only good-by. How was he to act ? how could he reassure her ?

Mr. Lightup, in tucked-up shirt-sleeves and a big apron, and carrying a tin of newly baked tarts, just then came in from the kitchen. As soon as he saw Will, he put down the tin, wiped his hands on either shirt-sleeve, and offered one to his visitor.

"Ay, you're a gentleman," he cried. "I knew a Vernon would act as such. Mother, she said you was going off without a God-bless-you, but I knew never a Vernon would slight an old acquaintance. Your pa, he's a real gentleman. I'm glad to think they appreciate him at India. I, for one, shan't be surprised if he rises to be *viceroi*. I'm proud to call him my schoolfellow ; but there,

he made better use of his books than I did. He's upper crust, and I'm only the sweet-stuff man."

"La, pa!" Annie cried, annoyed at the interruption, "and in your apron, too, and jam smears on your shirt-front!"

"I'm not ashamed of my honest calling," her father continued. "You wouldn't get your fine hats and bits of ribbon without it. But now, young sir, I'm glad to see you, for I want you to start fair, without impedimenta. I want you to take back that ring my girl accepted from you, and think no more of her. I've other plans for her more suitable."

Bill looked at Annie. Here was an unforeseen interruption indeed.

Annie's right hand closed on her left. "If he asks for it," she said, looking at her father, "he shall have it; but it won't be poor me to give it first."

"I don't want it," Will stammered. "I want her to keep it."

"Thank Heaven!" she cried, raising her eyes to the ceiling, and striking an attitude.

"Well, I must go," Will said: "Good-by, Annie." He held out his hand; but Mr. Lightup again interfered.

"My girl must give up that ring," he said. "I'll be no partner with deceit. I only knew how far it had gone this very day. She'll mate with her own class; and you'd best mate with yours, sir, if you want to be comfortable."

There was a rush of feet and low cries of "Shop." The boys were out of school.

"Go," he continued, "and do your duty; but take off that ring first."

She dare not brave him, and flung the ring on the table as she ran into the shop.

"Now, you may be thankful you haven't got some folks to deal with," he exclaimed, as William stood more as a spectator than an actor in the scene. "I wish you nothing but good; and by and by you'll be glad to think one of us had some sense. Here, come out through the kitchen; I'll let you out by the yard, and then you won't come against any of your old schoolfellows, and she'll see we mean what we say; but take the ring, sir," he added, as Bill would have left it behind; "and, next time, don't you be so keen to give rings."

And thus King Cophetua was hustled away by the back door.

wondering whether he was glad or sorry to be an engaged man no longer.

Late dinner was a farce : neither father nor mother ate, and the boys were too excited to have any appetite. There were letters to be written at the last, accounts to be squared up, the boxes to be collected in the hall ready for the early 'bus. It was midnight before the big boys went to bed, and then the husband and wife returned to the dining room, where the breakfast-things were already spread. Neither of them went to bed ; the restlessness of deep feeling possessed them ; they made unnecessary errands, gave each other unnecessary commissions, paced up and down the room together, and made pretence of being at ease. The night dragged on, and their set faces grew more wan ; then, as the morning advanced, they went upstairs stealthily, not to rouse the house, and, kneeling silently side by side, commended each other to God's protection.

The back stairs creaked under the servants' feet as they came shivering down ; the boys woke, and all at once realized what was to happen. Another attempt was made to eat and drink ; and then the whole party went to the station, where were the old mother and sisters, Mr. Doughty, a crowd of boys, and some of their parents.

Will was the hero of the hour. His father was reckoned of secondary importance by the admiring schoolfellows. There were speechless farewells. The train moved on, and the husband and son carried away with them the picture of a smiling mouth and yearning eyes, but no tears. She let them see her brave to the last.

CHAPTER X

A MIDDLE-AGED IDYL

AFTER the first few blank days—that first awakening with only the little boys, that putting away of things no longer needed by the beloved owners, that settling down with reduced household—Mrs. Vernon recovered her self-control, and set herself seriously to remember how many blessings remained within her touch. George's conduct helped her greatly. To him his father had *confided the protector's part*, and on George, who had always

played third fiddle, and had never dreamed of putting himself forward in the family councils, this altogether new departure at first pressed heavily. His mother, who knew nothing of her husband's last injunction, was touched and amused by the lad's changed manner. It was quite unusual for him to interest himself in home routine. He was a great authority at school, and was there, to all intents and purposes, Vernon primus; but in his mother's drawing room he was not at ease. His legs and arms, so capable and clever in the cricket and football field, failed him there entirely, and the supple hands, that grappled and clutched with the power and steadiness of a vice, could not carry a cup of tea properly there. Yet now, those first few days, he stayed at home from school, and followed his mother's movements with the persistency of a pet dog; his fair face was wrinkled with anxiety, lest he should fail to notice a single want; if she sat down, there he was with a footstool, which he tumbled over as he moved away; if she left the room, there he was at the door, ready with a kiss as he closed it on her; he watched every mouthful she ate, and sighed heavily at her want of appetite; he kept the boys amused in whispers, and they ruled him with a rod of iron in consequence, making him put them to bed, and tell them stories till they went to sleep. He busied himself looking after the servants, and stayed up after they had gone to bed, to make a tour of inspection round the bolts and bars, and he called cook to task because she had forgotten her mistress did not like pepper.

"If Master George is coming meddling over me," she said, in Harold's hearing, "he'll find a dish clout pinned to his coat some day."

Noting all this unusual behavior on George's part, his mother was quick to regain her serenity. It would never do for him—doing his utmost at school to obtain the Greek scholarship on which his heart was set—to have his rest at home turned into distress. Dalrymple, too, was taking to seeking his amusement away from home, because he could not bear the stillness and gloom; his bright face had lines on it as he looked at his mother's drawn expression. So, blaming herself for her selfishness, she roused herself against herself, and sent her elder boys off to school again, with a smile and a joke, welcoming them again on their return, as of old.

"Mother's all right again now," they told each other; and once more home, love, and brightness went hand-in-hand.

Indeed, she was wholly and solely a proud and happy mother, as

she made one of the audience in the school hall that Easter, and listened to the pompous Latin eulogium delivered by the noble patron, in presence of picked representatives of the county and the great universities, naming first on the list of scholars who had added to the fame of the ancient school that of Georgius Vernon, winner of the Langton Scholarship, and of four minor prizes, any one of which would have been greatly to his credit. Seventy years had elapsed since any boy had distinguished himself to such an extent, and the closely packed audience testified their praise by tumultuous cheering, which rang up to the great black oak beams again and again, till the hero of the hour, pushed forward by a crowd of his schoolfellows, stood for a moment on the platform, with drooping head and crimsoned face, bowing with the easy grace which generally distinguishes the English schoolboy. Then he ran off the scene and quitted the hall, in mortal dread lest more should be expected of him.

There was another speech made on the same subject directly afterward, in English this time, for the benefit of the unlearned—the speech of the noble patron, the Earl of Cotley, humorously bewailing his fate in not possessing a son capable of carrying off such laurels as those carried off by his young friend, Mr. George Vernon. “But,” he added, “his distinguished father’s intellect is as far above mine as his is above my son’s.” A few protesting *No’s* were quickly silenced, and the speech ended in wishing the new scholar’s university career might be as brilliant as his school career.

With this the chief excitement was over. Every master from other great schools complimented the Head-master of Cotley School on his boys, his staff, and his own ability; and he, in his turn, complimented his visitors, and his committee, and his noble patron; in fact, as Dalrymple tersely put it, “They laid it on thick all around.”

Mrs. Vernon’s daily addition to her letter to her husband was very full of the delightful gathering to do honor to her boy, and she failed not to add how she had pictured her husband sitting among his schoolfellows long ago in that same room, and was sure no boy had ever a fairer record, though he had not chosen to claim his due. Long letters had reached her from India that day, filling her cup of happiness to the brim. Mr. Vernon was installed in his new post, and his state establishment amazed his son.

"Will has not dared to play any tricks on me since I took up chief-commissioner grandeur," he wrote. "The Bumbledom impresses him much. I feel I did right to bring him; he already sees the value of industry, and is beginning to be fired with the desire to be at work. With trembling hope, I foresee something definite shaping itself. Of his own accord he writes a dictation every day, bringing it to me to correct, and has commenced 'Forbes' with a *moonshi*. He already manages to make his wants known in Hindustanee. It is just possible he has linguistic skill; if so, he'll get on in this land of many languages. I suspect Master George was wrong in condemning Bill's ear for sound; he seems to catch up these sounds easily enough. You should hear him imitate the Cowherd's song—it is exact. I remember he could talk well before he left, as a little fellow—that may make it easy to him now. I shall keep him with me till he masters the grammar. He is gaining something every day. We shall make him a worker, by and by."

So while George and Dalrymple were at their evening lessons, their mother talked on paper to the absent ones. She knew the deep interest of home news to them, and neither Will nor Fabian could say anything was wanting in the diarylike epistles which so regularly reached them.

Fabian was on the China station, sailing among the queer peoples thereabouts. Every now and then a parcel came from him of what he was pleased to call curios; the state of his finances decided their quality. Carvings in ivory were generally beyond him, though carvings in wood, or nuts, or spices were within his means; models, too, arrived of rickshaws, and junks, and temples. His last investment was a suit of armor, the object of intense envy in Dimple's friends. Every time the railway-van was seen approaching the house, the mother trembled lest some ponderous present was coming from the same quarter, especially as they were always sent "bearing," and might have been bought, in better condition, in London, for the money they cost by the time they were housed.

He wrote about this time that he was hoping to be able to purchase a Japanese garden-house, in sections, which could be easily put together again, and would be "a beautiful object for the tennis lawn, and so convenient for afternoon tea." An earnest protest went out by return mail, and a suggestion that his allowance

might "be reduced, as he evidently didn't know how to get rid of it."

"There won't be any more rubbish shot here, after that gentle hint," George said, when his mother told him what she had written.

When George went to Oxford the house seemed dreadfully large and silent, and it was while feeling the dulness consequent on his departure, that Mrs. Vernon was inclined to think favorably of the following letter. It was addressed in a round, schoolgirl hand, and "Private" in capital letters was over the seal. She was one of those people who like to surmise upon, and closely inspect letters in unfamiliar writing before opening them. Dimple, who was always ready for the postman, had taken the morning letters in, and had placed this at the top of the little pile. And when his mother had satisfied the little boys' wants, and had seen the elders commencing their breakfast, it was her wont to remark upon her possible correspondents as she sipped her tea. A custom to which the boys strongly objected, for it greatly exhausted their small stock of patience.

"What funny writing!" she exclaimed on this occasion. "Whose can it be? London postmark, too, and 'private.' Now who is there, Dimple, in London, with anything private to say to me? Not Mrs. Marleon—her writing is all flies' legs; nor Mrs. Holroyd—hers is so pretty. I wonder who it can be?" Then she went over the other three letters, and satisfied herself as to their contents before returning to the first.

Dimple sighed and fidgeted, and watched the clock. Surely he would have to start for school in ignorance unless he could induce his mother to hurry up. A deeper sigh than usual at last enlightened her. "Oh, curiosity, thy name is Dimple!" then she cried, and laughing at his mood, she tore open the envelope.

He watched her eyebrows curve in surprise as she read, which she did twice to herself. Then she bade him come and look over her shoulder.

"Little pitchers have long ears," she added, with a glance at Harold and Toby.

"That's me!" Harold exclaimed, but he did not resent the inference; indeed, he turned it to his advantage, taking the opportunity to abstract a large lump of butter from the dish while her *attention was diverted*. Dimple read as follows:

"Very private and confidential.

"OUR DEAR, VERY DEAR MRS. VERNON :

"Mamma is going to tell you that she and papa are going to travel for six months, and she says she is going to put us with some one who will polish us, and give us finishing lessons, at least I shall get finished, and Anny and Tanny will go through a regular course ; and I am going to one place, and Anny and Tanny to another, and so we shall be separated again, and it's a great shame, at least it isn't nice, now is it ? So we three thought of you, and oh, will you help us, you dear Mrs. Vernon ? If you could tell mamma of someone at Cotley, so that we might come and see you on half-holidays ; but I expect half-holidays won't be allowed though, for mamma says they are only given to babies. I know if we are sent to some prim old thing, and she keeps us at lessons from morning to night, we shall run away, I know we shall, wouldn't you ? Dear Mrs. Vernon, pa doesn't like it, I know ; but he doesn't like to say so. Oh, do help us, if you can, and be quick, for I believe mamma has someone in her eye to take us. And you won't tell about this letter, will you ? Anny and Tanny and me thought of you directly and we remembered the high school for girls you showed us when last we came to you. Could you advise mamma to send us there, tell her it is *awfully* strict, and the lessons are *frightfully* difficult, and then perhaps she will. *Do try*. Mamma says we know nothing ; but we do, only she makes us nervous, for she knows *everything* about ologies and all that. Please do forgive us for writing ; but mamma likes you better than she likes any of her own relations, and will listen to you. Dear Mrs. Vernon, with best and dearest love, your very, very affectionate friends,

"RANNY, ANNY, AND TANNY.

"*Burn this please*, and don't answer. Please excuse the writing, it is not my best, because I keep fancying I hear her coming, and I haven't got a pen that suits me much."

"They are queer," was Dimple's comment, as he finished the postscript. "What shall you say?"

"I will think it over this morning. I am afraid Mrs. Marleon will not accept advice from me ; indeed, I have no right to offer it, only I do pity those poor girls."

"Couldn't we have them here ? It would be fun to have some *girls on the premises*."

"My dear boy, what could we do with them?"

But his idea remained with her all the morning, and a letter from Mrs. Marleon, at noon, gave her the opportunity of interfering :

"I would not acknowledge to anyone but you," wrote Mrs. Marleon, "that I am extremely disappointed in my girls—indeed, I am quite knocked up with trying to shape their chaotic minds. I see, too, their father's easy temper might encourage their childishness, notwithstanding my utmost efforts to stimulate their slumbering ideas. Their teachers have entirely failed to carry out my educational plans, though I so constantly wrote to keep them up to their duties, and I see very plainly that I must begin all over again. Can you help me? I want two separate homes where cultivation will be faithfully practised. Urania requires refined culture ; a professor's family will be necessary for her. The other two need to acquire *everything*. I am ashamed to say so, but their ignorance is lamentable. Constantia assures me she knows nothing of the very rudiments of knowledge, and—can you believe it?—declares she had never even heard of the Glacial Period ! Poor children, I quite shudder at their intellectual poverty ; indeed, I am so unhinged that my doctor has ordered me to take a prolonged tour, and we think of being absent until the winter. Can you come up and see me, or shall I come down to you to discuss a possible opening in your neighborhood ? They are so fond of you that I should feel comforted to think you might see them for me now and then ; among your townful of masters and professors we might find what we want."

The afternoon's post brought yet another letter on the same subject :

"My poor little girls," wrote their father, "are to be sent off to school again while we go 'globe trotting.' Can you, and will you, use your influence among your learned neighbors to help us to a *kind* home ? Lay it on thick about 'cultsha' to the missis, but let the main thing be comfort and kindness. Answer this to my club, and be mute to my better half !"

Mrs. Vernon went to Great Street, and took opinion in council as to the likeliest person to suit the conflicting tastes.

"*I would take them,*" she said, "and they could attend classes ;

but I could not take pay, and I don't think it would be fair to William to ask him to keep other people's children, especially when there is no necessity."

"Would William object, if we took them?" Isoline asked. "We've plenty of room, and I should like to have young people about us again."

"You!"

"Yes; Gerty and I have often said we should like to have children to look after, and mother says so too, and great-auntie won't dislike it; you know she hates a quiet house."

Here was a door opened unexpectedly, and the more they talked it over the more feasible it seemed.

"Leonard always liked girls to play with best," Mrs. Lancing declared; "and for his sake she loved little girls; and if they were good and teachable, it would recall those happy days when her nephews were with them."

So Mr. and Mrs. Marleon came down and discussed the plan. The strictness of the rules, and the vastness of the knowledge assured by the lady B. A. teachers at the High School for Girls; the illustrious scholars on the school rolls; the spectacled, pallid show pupils, with their hair dragged remorselessly off their rounded temples; and their stores of learning, almost reconciled Mrs. Marleon to the too great comfort of Great Street, while her husband, in his gratitude and satisfaction, would have closed with Mrs. Vernon's offer without further consideration.

For a fortnight negotiations dragged on; now the mother would not, then she would agree, while the girls grew thin with anxiety. Once, when she had actually written her acquiescence, she bethought herself of the schoolboys, and then it seemed impossible she could get over that difficulty. Who was to be certain those audacious lads might not carry on flirtations with her innocent darlings? This fear necessitated another visit to the lady principal, who declared the idea preposterous. "Her pupils look at schoolboys! Such a thing was impossible; let Mrs. Marleon dismiss such a vulgar notion from her mind at once. 'Cultshaw' could not go hand-in-hand with a liking for schoolboys. She obliged every young lady, while walking to and from the school, to give her word of honor to look neither to the right hand nor to the left. And as the girls' school began a quarter of an hour after the boys', and ended ten minutes before the boys', unseemly encounters were *impossible—at least*, while going to and from school. This was

unassailable logic, and that the senior Mrs. Vernon would countenance impropriety was not for one moment to be supposed." So at last the three beaming girls, radiant with satisfaction, took up their abode in Great Street.

When George at Oxford heard of this arrangement, he was not pleased, he only hoped they would keep to themselves, and not come bothering home during the long vacation ; he trusted they would not be made free of the tennis court. There were too many girls in every fellow's way at Oxford ; they certainly were not wanted in the Long. He understood Tanny and Ranny were to have the very room *he* had had at his grandmother's. He could just fancy girls sticking bows of ribbon and plates all over the walls, making it look like a pawnbroker's shop. But though George disapproved, his mother approved, and her three admirers were constantly with her, their affectionate enthusiasm atoning for their many shortcomings, their untidiness, unpunctuality, and want of steady purpose.

Yet they were quick to see the advantages of their present position, and gradually became aware of the value of homely virtues. Precept had been before them ever since they could remember, but practice had hitherto been wanting ; and now, as they watched the working of solid duties made gracious by steady kindness and unflinching thought for the comfort of others, they gained some idea of the beauty of family life—of order and discipline and co-operation. Urania, as the oldest, perceived this soonest and most clearly ; she found romance and poetry in the elderly orderly household, and for the first time in her life looked below the surface instead of judging from the mere outside.

The old woman, gradually loosening her tenacious hold of the things of time day by day, failing bit by bit, and mixing up the long-past yesterday with to-day, was an entirely new study to these feckless girls. First she provoked their private mirth, then roused their pity, and next came, to the eldest at all events, a deeper feeling, comprehending a future possible to herself when, life's work done, the world would let the worn-out laborer alone, to drift whither ?

Urania thought of life's work very vaguely—as for searching for it, such an idea was beyond her as yet. It would come "somehow, sometime,"—that it might come and she not see it did not trouble her. First, of course, would come the joys suitable to *maidenhood*, when, emancipated from the schoolroom, she would

take her place in society—a happy, youthful society, bright with red coats, and blue coats, and mamma would cease to strive to cram her with “ologies,” and papa would let her dress smartly, and take her to parties. Marriage would follow, as a matter of course ; but the hero was still nothing more than a shadowy outline, the life-work would probably be looking after her family and house. After that period she did not go—ages and ages in her way of reckoning had to pass before she steadied down to house-keeping. She read of people who lived up to a purpose, who attained high characters for philanthropy and great deeds—and admired such people ; but she never considered that great deeds had small beginnings, that no hero becomes a hero all at once, however the world might so suppose—the seed must be there, must be cultivated and encouraged, the crowning deed of heroism is but the flower which has all along been preparing to burst forth.

Great-aunt Jane liked seeing the girls about the house. She still kept her doors open and sat where she could see the staircase, and the hall, and the inner hall-door ; she was still sharp to hear the footsteps, however stealthy, pass up and down the stairs, and she always called to whoever was there. It was from her the girls heard of Isoline’s engagement to “that silly fellow Truman, who surely needn’t have gone so far to search for heathen !” This knowledge brought unexpected romance. Urania delighted to see the smiles and color come into Isoline’s face when the weekly mail brought her lover’s letter ; the very tone of her voice became a peal of joy-bells, as she made some transparent excuse to absent herself from the family circle to read and re-read her precious missive. The school classes with their real hard work were made bearable by the happiness of this home life, and the half-holidays were fertile oases. On these days the united families made excursions into the beautiful country with Dimple and his friends to protect the women from stray cows and possible tramps, Mrs. William Vernon’s brougham followed to pick up the weary and to carry refreshments, the elderly sisters grew girlish again in the solitary lanes and fields, and ran as swiftly and climbed over stiles as deftly as the younger children ; then there was high tea on their return at Mrs. William’s, where Mr. Doughty often rejoined them, and the walk back to Great Street in the late evening—a life of ideal happiness to the Marleons.

When George went back for the Long Vacation, he found the three girls as much at home in his mother’s house as he was—veri-

table daughters of the house ; he found, also, that Urania's eyes had become prettier, and that she stood out distinctly superior to her sisters in good looks. He found, too, that "other fellows" had made the same discovery, and that, indeed, all the three were held by the Sixth Form to be acquisitions to Cotley. Dimple's society was actually courted by the upper-form fellows, because of his fair friends, and tickets for any and every entertainment patronized by the school were liberally showered on him "and party."

Titania and Constantia knew without being told in what high estimation they were held, and had many a giggle to themselves about it ; but Urania would have nothing to say about "mere boys"—she generally let her sisters have their say and their giggles without her. Her interest was in her elders—in Isoline, who lived to look forward ; in Mrs. Lancing, whose dead boy was still before her, as it were, a tangible being personated by those who would have been his contemporaries ; and in Mrs. William, whose life was bound up in her husband and children, and for their sweet sakes in all who needed sympathy and help.

Very early in August Mrs. William and her boys went to a little village on the Dorset coast. George wanted to be where he could read undisturbed by tourists ; and Dalrymple, who had lately succumbed to a desire to be a soldier, also was to prepare to pass the preliminary examination for Woolwich ; so they chose an almost unknown place, and took up their abode in the rectory, the rector having gone for his holiday, and his *locum tenens* being lodged at the village inn.

The *locum tenens* was Mr. Doughty's brother, the self-sacrificing East End curate. With him George became great friends ; and with his thin, pale young wife Mrs. William contracted a great friendship. Later on Isoline and Urania and the Cotley curate joined them, and a fortnight of untempered happiness followed. Morning bathes in the sandy cove ; morning walks and scrambles, in the shabbiest of garments, along the towering cliffs, or at low water among the shrimp pools on the rocky shore ; afternoon excursions among the fertile valleys and sheltered villages surrounding little gray churches—the dead lying, as they had lived, among familiar friends ; then the evenings on the "lookout," near the white coastguard cottages, watching the sun sink behind rampant Portland ; while inland the hazy country lay, a many-colored surface, till it faded into obscurity on the far horizon.

Harold and Toby grew brown and square, and developed alarming appetites ; while their mother grew so young and pretty that Urania told George no one would suppose she was *his* mother.

But he did not like the remark, and snubbed her for it. "No one thought whether a mother was pretty or not," he said. "It was just like a girl always to be thinking of appearances."

They were on their way to Sunday morning service, and Isoline was excited because the sermon was to be preached by a missionary from Burmah. He drove over from Swanage just in time to preach, so there was no chance of finding out what part of Burmah he came from beforehand. He was a young man, hollow-eyed and emaciated—the effects of fever—and had been compelled to return to England to save his life. He was an enthusiast about the mission work ; even the sleepy country-people grew interested as he told of its toils and disappointments and raptures. He put a graphic picture before them of the bazaars, the temples, the false gods, the hundreds of thousands of men and women living and dying in appalling impurity for want of knowing better. There was hardly a heart in his audience which did not leap up to his impassioned appeal, and for the moment wish to go out and assist in the self-sacrificing toil for God's sake. George sat quivering with the thought of such work as this ; and young Doughty, sitting in the little chancel, sent up a voiceless prayer that in time he might be counted worthy to win such souls for Christ.

Then the preacher spoke of those who had already seen the result of their labors, and, wholly ignorant of the sensation he was causing in the breast of at least one of his hearers, mentioned the name of the Reverend Frederick Truman with generous enthusiasm. "The zeal and practical knowledge of this great and good man," he said, "was the life and soul of the mission in that part of Burmah. He had compelled the respect and admiration of the most learned Burmese, and, in a time of great peril to foreigners, had entirely, through his own personal influence, prevented the murder of his colleagues and the sacking of the mission premises. He is one of those earnest, self-emptying men," he added, "whose invaluable influence cannot be sufficiently estimated."

Mrs. Vernon put her hand in Isoline's arm as they walked back to the rectory in silence ; and Isoline's eyes were shining with happiness. It seemed to her she had received a God-sent message to replenish her store of faith and love and hope.

She was much too bashful to speak of her lover at luncheon

when the preacher came in ; but her faithful sister-in-law asked questions and elicited further particulars for her ; and Isoline ate and drank without tasting what it was—the mental food was all in all.

Urania was all eyes and ears. The elderly lover was somebody worth loving, after all, she thought ; and Miss Isoline's engagement, which had been spoken of as such a hopeless, stupid, uninteresting affair, became infinitely beautiful. Many thoughts came uppermost after this, all tending to bring into prominence the realities of life. Her mind was at work more profitably now, and over her face came gradually the subtle change from mischievous, curious, unreflecting childhood to thoughtful, pensive womanhood.

In that fortnight's visit to Tilly Cove, Isoline and her girl companion were drawn nearer together ; and when they went home, while Mrs. Lancing took Titania and Constantia to fill their vacant places, they became fast friends ; they played duets on the piano, and rowed together on the river, and, crowning joy of all, Isoline read little bits from Mr. Truman's letters to her ; and Urania felt herself a confidante in a real love affair. She had mentally passed years ahead of her sisters when they returned, and the school routine began again ; and even Mr. Doughty began to notice the deepening sweetness in the pretty eyes, and caught a new music in her voice.

"Her own mother won't know Ranny again," Mrs. Vernon wrote to her husband. "She will be a charming girl. I fancy Master George looks at her oftener than he need ; he's beginning to be critical about the young ladies, and actually wants me to give a little dance before he goes back to Oxford. I take it all as a matter of course, but Dimple is down upon his new departure, and has taught Toby to call him 'de ladies' man.' I do hope the Marleons will leave the girls here ; they are coming back in November. *She* is not well, and wants to have a settled home, and as *her* wish is law to him (enviable woman !), she is sure to get one without delay. The Holroyds are at some mountain village near Como, fascinated by the scenery and the people with whom they mix, that Flossy may acquire the right accent. I don't know how their children in England are, but they are with relations, I believe ; so I hope they are all right. How is the misunderstanding between your rajahs progressing ? I hope your cards won't be too hard to play, and that diplomacy will settle matters without aid of force.

Your last allusion made me rather uneasy. I have known so many 'little wars' create such great sorrow, and there is something in to-day's paper that worries me. However, I won't meet trouble halfway, but will hope that long before this is answered you will have held a durbar and seen the enemies make friends at it."

The dance came off, and the Marleon girls were present in plain schoolgirl muslin, to signify they were not out, but only there on sufferance; and just as the upset house was being put to rights next morning, Harold announced that the railway-van was at the gate, and "there must be something from Fabian."

So there was. The Japanese garden-house, after all; also a bundle of Chinese kites of all shapes and sizes; also two large Japanese bows, about eight feet long. And as the mother stood at the door and watched these outlandish packages deposited at the foot of the steps, and heard there were fifteen shillings to pay, she inwardly determined the reduced allowance should be a threat no longer, but an established fact.

But what a joy that garden house was to the boys! Mr. Doughty's services and those of other favored friends were requisitioned, and the quaint structure presently stood with its corner bells, its carved veranda or balcony, its dragon flag, and its pictured interior, on the trim English lawn—a bit of the real life of Japan. George wrote and read in it till his vacation was over, and then Dalrymple and his friends took possession of it, and on half-holidays it was stormed and taken, or its garrison made heroic resistance—according to the pluck of its attackers and defenders—while the little boys made an admiring audience. "That sneak Steed" would fain have "sucked up," Dimple declared, "so as to have a hand in our sieges;" for Steed was still the thorn in his flesh, running him close at lessons. But it was too late, and Steed had to content himself with a peep at the fantastically carved roof—from the outside of the garden.

CHAPTER XI

DALRYMPLE'S BEST SCORE

STEED and Dalrymple were together in the Army Preliminary Examination, and both passed without exemptions. So Dimple's triumph—and probably Steed's, too—was slightly clouded, because neither could exult over the other's failure. A whole holiday was given on their account, the first Dimple had ever gained for his schoolfellows, though George had given them several. The school had a few years before been despoiled of many extra holidays—all the saints' days having been previously allowed to be so celebrated—and this deprivation had long since rankled as a sore; therefore a triumph by a clever boy, which resulted in a holiday, always made that boy the joy of his comrades for the time. That Steed should share that triumph was a great annoyance to Dimple, and his mother felt obliged to read him a gentle lecture against his unworthy feelings, and as she was very chary of reproof, Dimple felt it all the more.

George was at home for the day, and he, too, had said something about jealousy, quoting Shakspeare in a way his brother considered offensive; so that altogether the boy was in an unhappy mood, and though the day was cold and gloomy, he went off to the river directly after dinner to feed his vexation by a solitary row. His mother could not bear to see one of her boys unhappy, and George's visit, to which she had so looked forward, was half shorn of its pleasure by Dimple's waywardness. She listened to her elder boy, and showed her interest in his doings, but he saw her attention was divided, and proposed a walk to the embankment. "And let the kids come too," he added, with the thoughtfulness which was becoming so marked.

She was quick to read his thoughts, and did her best to make herself more sympathetic. They met few people till they reached the riverside; there, unless the weather was very bad, were sure to be plenty of boys round the banks by the bridge, and Harold and Arthur insisted on stopping to see them shove off and play tricks with their *oars on their neighbors*. Steed was there in high spirits; indeed, he was rather bumptious. He was in a narrow skiff

which held but one, and was precarious even for one ; but he would listen to no cautions from the big lads ; his honors were too new for him to submit to advice, and he had learnt from an idler that Dalrymple had started in one of the same kind scarcely half an hour before ; “ but, then, he knows how to handle it,” was the exasperating addition.

George laughed to see the young fellow start awkwardly off, splashing all round him. “ He’ll taste the water before he’s done,” he remarked as he and his mother and little brothers went down the riverside, keeping the inexperienced rower in view. No other boys went the same way ; they were off on the other side of the bridge to some meadows where ratting was going on. Presently Dimple came toward them, pulling swift and straight, the light boat seeming to go of its own accord—the exercise had evidently exorcised the evil spirit—his face was red and smiling, and he called out with his usual good temper as he passed ; but the sight of Steed laboring and rocking raised his sarcasm, and though he said nothing, his rival read his thoughts in his expression. Steed turned and followed him, thinking to imitate his strokes, and so get on better, and Mrs. Vernon’s heart was lightened as she and her boys walked on. She could question and listen then with undivided interest, and the little boys took advantage of the close talk going on between the two to drop behind and pelt some ducks which kept very near the bank, foolishly hoping that every pebble was something good to eat.

It was not a good afternoon for a walk by the river, and no others availed themselves of it ; the pollarded trees on either bank were hung with the raindrops which had fallen in the morning ; the water no longer reflected the blue and white of a summer sky, and flocks of songless birds flew high up overhead already starting for their winter quarters ; there were few cows left in the reedy meadows, no flowers or grasses by the waterside, but the mother and son walked briskly, following the ever-turning path, intent on their talk. Harold interrupted them presently to show them what he called a fossil, for he was just beginning the “ klecting ” time of life, when treasures are liberally scattered about. George turned to hear what he had to say, and his eyes at the same moment became fixed on something far behind.

“ I’ll be back in a moment, mother,” he suddenly exclaimed, *hurriedly pushing his little brother aside ; “ mind the kids. I’ll be back in a moment.”*

The haste with which he started to run back, the pose of his head all the time he was saying so, his eyes riveted on the distance, the long stride he broke into as he ran, alarmed Mrs. Vernon. She seized each child's hand, and fearing she knew not what, followed as fast as she could urge them to go. There was a sound of shouting as they proceeded, and a splashing of water, and a turn round the reedy bank revealed to her horrified gaze George, not many yards ahead, just taking a leap into the river. There were the two little boats upset, a boy's hand visible above the water for an instant, then a head—Dimple's, and then she knew he was striking toward the shore, heavily hampered with a burthen which seemed too great for his strength. She watched it all, hardly taking in the fact that one of her boys was battling for his life and that of another—Steed's, probably—while the other was doing his best to come to their rescue, though the boats had drifted between them, and he had difficulty in swimming clear of them; all this she saw and noted with a terrible calm at which she wondered even as she felt it. It seemed hours, and yet she had hardly ceased panting from her rapid walk, when she saw Dimple clutch at the grasses on the bank with his free hand, while with the other he kept hold of the head of his unconscious companion, Steed. George was hardly a second in joining them. His hat was off, his face and hair dripping. He swam vigorously to his brother. All his power was directed to prevent the two boys sinking back. He was just in time; for as he relieved Dalrymple from his load and swung Steed up on the bank, Dimple only just had strength to crawl out of the water before he too lay unconscious beside his seemingly dead schoolfellow.

Mrs. Vernon never lost her presence of mind. She had both boys' collars off, and had directed some of the people who had congregated round the spot how to rub Steed while she and George did their best for Dimple, before a doctor arrived. Both lads were carried into the nearest house, and in a very short time Dalrymple revived, and recognized his mother. His first faint words were:

"He was my enemy, you see." As if he felt he should apologize for causing her so much trouble.

Steed was much longer in coming round. He had got under his boat in its upset, somehow, and but for Dimple's readiness he must have been drowned. What a going home was Dimple's!—*the boys of his form ran alongside the cab, cheering as they ran.*

Shop-people came out of their shops, and took up the cheers as they heard what had happened. Annie Lightup stood at her door waving her handkerchief, and he had not long been home before Mrs. Vernon, senior, her daughters and the Marleon girls, Mr. Doughty, and several masters arrived, to condole and congratulate. But Dimple was hurried off to bed by the doctor's orders. He must postpone holding a court. Meantime George came in for glistening eyes and blooming cheeks as the girls heard how it had all happened. By the little brothers' account, they had been the real heroes. Harold persisted in saying he had really given the alarm and helped his mother along, while Arthur repeated again and again how he "had runned and runned, and see'd them drowned." The mother's daily addition to her letter to her husband was almost incoherent, though she did her best to write calmly ; but he was able to read it, and to understand more clearly than if she had rounded her periods and framed her sentences with grammatical accuracy—how she alternated between thankfulness and pride and horror, how sorely her heart had been tried, how mercifully it was comforted.

Dalrymple was all right next morning, without even a cold, but Steed was kept in bed. His parents took the matter very coldly ; they wrote a polite letter of thanks to the two Vernon boys, and hoped "the incident would be a lesson to all to avoid foolhardiness in the future." It was just as well they did not add to the general homage paid to Dimple for the next few days, for it was enough to turn his head. George had gone back to college, so his brother had all the laudation, and he was quite inclined to make the most of it. When Steed returned to school, he showed a wish to be good friends ; indeed, he tried to make Dimple accept the greatest treasure he possessed—a knife of many blades and many contrivances—to show his gratitude ; but Dimple would have no such reward for a simple act of duty, though he met the friendly overtures halfway. Later on, however, both brothers received medals from the Royal Humane Society, and their names figured in most of the newspapers, with caricatures of their faces in a few.

"It's a good thing you are not overburdened with nerves and feelings," was Great-aunt Jane's comment on the mother's conduct. "Many people would have screamed and cried uselessly ; they tell me you acted like a rational being, and took it all as a matter of course. You are the right stuff, Miss Amy, for the mother of heroes. It's best to make up your mind that some of those boys

will meet with perils and dangers. I'm glad my pretty Will can't get made food for powder, though. What's he doing now? I'm never told anything."

Mrs. William was glad to avoid further remark upon the accident, for the mere thought of those terrible moments still made her pulses throb, and turned her sick, and she told the old woman how Will was turning out a linguist, and making friends with his father's associates.

"And he's such a daring rider, and such a good shot, too."

"Shot! What! trust that boy with firearms?"

"Oh, yes! He goes on shooting expeditions. His father is quite proud of his correct aim. He is a great deal with the officers of the cavalry, too, and is great friends with a young Lieutenant Osborne. They are both the same age to the very day, and just the same height and figure. Poor Will! he regrets immensely he wasn't more industrious at school, that he might have been a cavalry officer, too, by this time."

"Pho! he's too good. Most army men are mere dressed-up dummies. Even my own poor father was a nincompoop. However, he rose to be a colonel under Nelson—no, I don't think it was Nelson. However, that's neither here nor there; but I always understood he was nothing without his fine clothes and his plumed hat; but I shall always be thankful he left me a pension. And how do you get on without him?"

"Without Will? Well, I look forward; he'll soon have served his year, you know. Time goes very fast."

"Do you think so? Dear me! I think it's creepy-crawly enough. But you young things don't feel as we used to feel. There's Emma"—"Emma" was old Mrs. Vernon—"why, she lost the best husband that ever lived, and look at her, always lively and happy. I verily believe," here she sank her voice into a whisper, "she'd marry again to-morrow, if anyone would have her. I often have my doubts about that young Doughty; he's always here."

"Oh, Aunt Jane, he's young enough to be her——"

"Grandson. So he is; but let me tell you, *all* men are not bent on young women only. Here's a nice house for a poor parson to step into, with me and the girls to keep things comfortable. He might do worse."

Mrs. William jumped up, saying, "Now, Aunt Jane, you are *naughty*. I won't listen to such nonsense. See I've brought you

some sweets and cakes ; the boys told me you like this kind. Now, good-by. Shall I call Smith ? ”

“ No, thank you ; I’m not quite demented yet. I can quite take care of myself yet. Good-by ; you are a good girl. I do love sweets and cakes—shows my youth, you know.”

The younger woman went home in the gloaming, somewhat sad at heart. She had just declared her husband would soon be back, but she had no confidence in her own declaration. It was true the year which would make him eligible for a certain pension was nearly completed, but, in his present good position, it was hardly to be expected he would be content to come home. Ever since he had gone, she had in her innermost heart feared that his cheering assurance must of necessity come to nothing. The lengthened separation weighed on her spirits, her natural buoyancy had forsaken her again, and yet when she entered her own door and heard the happy shouts of the little boys arise as they came tumbling through the hall to greet her, while Dimple’s “ Hulloa, mother ! ” from the study testified to his pleasure in the sound of her voice, she knew she was in her right place doing the duty which was nearest to her, and until after the last meal, when the children were asleep, and Dimple deep in lessons, she was bright and merry. But when the stillness of evening prevailed, when the maidens were in their sewing room—the work of the day done—and only faint sounds of their voices penetrated through the baize doors which shut off the kitchen offices, her spirits again drooped, and even the writing the letters to husband and sons failed to rouse them. Her letters were colored by her depression, and she tore up what she had written, for she would not have these dear ones suppose she was anything but well and happy. The silence of the room in which she sat, the absence of all sounds along the suburban road, deepened her depression, and she could not reason with herself—a sense of danger stole over her till her heart beat almost audibly with the dread of something hurtful. She was alone ; Dalrymple was shut up in the study, and yet there seemed a presence near—nothing tangible or visible, only the sense of someone. With an effort she left the room and went upstairs ; the little boys lay fast asleep, their rosy mouths partly open, their eyes just gleaming under the long lashes. In sound of their breathing, the horrible fear left her, and then a strong feeling of the necessity of prayer possessed her ; *and kneeling against Arthur’s little bed, she prayed for her absent ones that the shield of their heavenly Father might go before them,*

that his love might enfold them, and his pity protect them. All her dread and terror fell from her as she fervently placed them in his gracious keeping. "If God be for us, who can be against us?" she pleaded, and the peace born of perfect faith returned to her as she remembered he was as near to them in the fever-stricken city, or on the storm-tossed sea, as she felt he was near to her at home. Her love could but show itself in feeble prayer. His love could compass them about, and in the hollow of his hand he could hide them.

"Prayer moves the hand that moves the world."

So she rose from her knees calmed and convinced. She had commended them to the keeping of the Impregnable. She was in safety while they might be in great danger, but her prayer could forge armor and quell storms, for her God was a God of mercy and longsuffering, who doeth all things well. With the morning light she marvelled at her unwonted horror in the quiet, guarded home, and her sensible practical mind revolted at the recollection; to avoid its return, she invited Isoline and Urania to stay with her. A letter from Fabian came to cheer her too; a letter that raised Dimple's scorn, for in it Fluffy related an adventure of having lost himself in Japan, when he had to camp out alone on the mountain-side all night and to assuage his hunger with leaves and fireflies.

"They would have burnt his mouf," was Harold's comment, while Dimple begged his mother would mention in reply that he—Fabian—was the only "green" member of the family, so need not trouble himself to send such yarns home. George managed to spend two days with her just then, curiously enough; for on his last visit, he said he could get no further leave that term. However, there he was, and it amused his mother to see his careful toilet for dinner, and his punctilious discharge of the little attentions due from the young man of the house to the young-lady visitor. Urania affected to treat him as a boy, and spoke of university *men* with scorn; but he had broadened and lengthened greatly during the past few months. His upper lip was shaded, too, and he looked like an athlete. His mother delighted in her great son with his boyish eyes, and could hardly bear to hear him flouted and laughed at by Urania. It amused her, though, to watch the little scene, the pretence of the girl, the reality of the boy. How the old days came back to her when she, too, had *magnified trifles, and thought little of realities*. It is nice to play

the game one's self, to feel the power to charm and to wound, to heal and to annoy, to be the light of another's eyes, the sun of another's world ; but it is nicer and safer to stand aside and observe without feeling, and be able to turn away when one has seen enough without the wear and tear of deep emotion.

Mr. Doughty was present when George said good-by ; they all stood at the front door, and as George went down the steps his last look was at Urania, though his last words were for his mother. She followed his eyes ; Urania was laughing and bidding him be a good boy at school ; she " begged his pardon—college " ; and as he passed out of sight, the girl turned to the curate, who had Toby in his arms, lifting him up to see over the rest, and her eyes became so suddenly soft and full of deep feeling that it was impossible to misinterpret their meaning.

Mrs. Vernon read it aright with sorrow ; the curate did not read it at all. He might be Urania's fancy, but she was not his ; he had no serious thought for any girl, for his desires were for work and no woman must come between that and him. Urania was to him " one of the Marleon girls," nothing more. They made the two pleasant houses pleasanter to him, it was true, but the pleasantness was mild, and for many a year to come he could afford no self-indulgence ; the vigor of his youth must be given to his work undiminished by earthly passion. His brother's example was before him, his early marriage tying his hands, diminishing his means, increasing his anxieties. With the lofty ideas of his age, he regarded his brother's life spoilt ; *he* would and must keep free from matrimonial fetters ; *he* would go out alone into the vineyard, not withheld by dread of harm to another, not racked by selfish concern ; *he* would not risk another's health because he cared not about jeopardizing his own ; the truest love, he told himself, ~~was~~ the least selfish. But he was young and healthy, he needed no home companionship, he was sufficient in himself for himself, and, above all, he had never yet been tempted sufficiently to forget all these admirable determinations. He had admired and liked many a pretty girl. Sunday school had often been very attractive to him because of a pretty teacher ; but so far his appetite and sleep had never failed him because of a woman's face, and as Mrs. Vernon watched for a responsive glance from him to Urania, and saw only the calm smile and friendly look, she was comforted. Urania was young, she might fancy half a dozen men before she loved one ; it *would do her no harm* to let her girlish hopes rest on this steady

curate for a while ; but it would be a much more serious matter if the curate regarded her as a possible wife on one hundred and fifty pounds a year. How, then, could she ever meet her old friends again, to be regarded as a faithless guardian and unsafe friend ?

Then, too, she rejoiced on George's account—a steady affection would be such a safeguard for him. Urania was growing up so comformable and pretty ; she would be such a pleasant daughter-in-law, and when once Mr. Doughty was far away, the girl could not fail to forget him, and to see the many more desirable.

All this flew through Mrs. Vernon's thoughts as they all turned from the front door, and entered the drawing room.

"I almost envy him," the curate said, "going back to the dear old place, and yet I'm glad all its temptations are over for me. And I'm so much nearer the real work ; but it is a jolly time. I suppose because it's one's first taste of manhood's privileges. But oh, what silly babies some of the college *men* are ! No, not such a fellow as George ; he had the preparation of a public school ; beside, one expects better things of a reading fellow ; but some of them are literally unfit to be out of sight of a tutor, stupid, snobby, vulgar boobies ; but that's unparliamentary language, and of course such fellows as those would go wrong wherever they were."

When he rose to go, Mrs. Vernon did not ask him to stay ; after the revelation in her young guest's eyes, she considered it wiser not to encourage him. No one can be sure a young man is positively uninflamable ; it is best to shut the stable door before the steed is stolen ; but though he went away quickly after George, and mentioned a special service he had to conduct, he was back again within an hour, bringing the evening paper, and after reading it, Urania's love affairs at once faded in the background.

It was only a short telegram—but in Mrs. Vernon's thoughts it expanded to volumes—merely these few words :

"Commissioner Vernon, accompanied by some cavalry, took possession of Rajah Lal Singh's fort on the 6th inst. Lieutenant Osborne slightly wounded while gallantly leading attack."

That was all, but how the bald fact expanded in their excited minds. Mrs. Lancing and her mother had quickly followed the curate, and *they all surmised and conjectured, and supposed in con-*

cert. It was evident the little misunderstanding had as usual widened and broadened, "till actual force had to be used."

In William's last letter he had merely said his father "was very busy over that stupid Wattibuldi business, which kept them in the station longer than they liked," and his father had said little more; but Mrs. Vernon could imagine the wearying papers and interviews, the procrastinations and subterfuges with which petty native courts torment Englishmen of business habits, and could realize how her husband's sorely tried patience would at last give way, and then how quickly and decisively he would act. She had no fear of danger for him; he was not likely to court it, and he was so highly considered by the native princes that it was very unlikely they would hurt him personally, so she could think of poor young Osborne's wound, and express her sympathy with his mother.

"Won't she be proud of him!" she cried. "And to think he is our Will's great friend, and no older than Will. What a dear brave boy! I'm so glad he's Will's chosen friend."

And then she reckoned back to the date—there had been delay in getting the telegram sent—and her face, flushed with excitement, suddenly grew white. The engagement had actually taken place the day of her profound depression. Who could say but her fervent prayers had averted worse evil from her husband's attacking force?

Another telegram a day or two later caused some perplexity however.

"It was not Lieutenant Osborne who led the successful sortie so pluckily," it ran, "but Mr. Commissioner Vernon."

That her husband was brave enough went without saying, the wife argued; but that it was possible and politic was another thing; and no letter could reach home to explain matters for at least a fortnight, probably three weeks. How were his womenkind to possess their souls in patience so long?

In the letter that arrived that week, Mr. Vernon touched upon the belligerent rajah's matter lightly.

"He'll have to be frightened into good behavior by a show of arms," he said. "I suppose I shall have to take some of the cavalry, and beard him in his den; he's not likely to make even a *show of resistance*. You'll probably see a little notice in a corner

of the papers in very small type, with the names misspelt, telling how another noble native gentleman has been scandalously treated by a haughty Englishman in office.

"Don't be frightened ; you know I am a man of peace and run no risk, and I'll leave Will at home in perfect safety. The necessity may not arrive, but if it should, it will be merely a ride through the night to Lal Fort, a dash up the hill for our cavalry, and we shall ride back next day to get home in time for dinner."

This satisfied most of his family; but his wife was puzzled and went up to the India Office, where she learnt little more. "The rajah had resisted the commissioner's call to surrender, and had pointed guns against the little force," she was told. "Someone—who, the telegram did not make clear—had led a few dismounted soldiers up the mound on which the fort stood, had seized the guns and turned them on the fort. It was believed the rajah had made terms in consequence. The whole affair was over in a few hours."

"And Lieutenant Osborne was wounded ?" she asked.

"We can't tell ; the telegram first said so ; but Mrs. Osborne was here yesterday, saying her son had telegraphed to her that he was 'all right,' so the wound must have been very slight ; but that your husband would lead the soldiers is unlikely ; indeed, it is impossible."

This was comforting, and she went home convinced the telegrams had altogether blundered.

CHAPTER XII

A HERO

So they had, but only partially ; Lieutenant Osborne was in orders on that 10th of December to accompany the little attacking force to make the Wattibuldi rajah promise either to keep the peace with his neighbor or give himself up to justice ; but as the evening came on Lieutenant Osborne still lay on his *charpoy*, a victim to fever, notwithstanding the constant doses of quinine he had taken all through the day. His captain ran in and out, *received each time with assurances that he was ever so much fitter,*

and the invalid energetically protested that no one need fuss himself over him, for when the time came he should be in his saddle all right—so he declared to the doctor and to all the brother officers as they each came pitying him, and his temper got worse with the fever, or the latter got worse with the former, perhaps—until his last visitor went off in a huff, using very unparliamentary language as he went. William Vernon rode over to the lines as soon as his friend's *chit* informed him he was seedy, and Will's commiseration was profound. Ever since Mr. Vernon had told Will he was to remain in cantonments positively, the boy had fretted and fumed. "His place was at his father's side," he said, trying sentiment when he found cajolment would not answer.

"I have told your mother I shall keep you out of danger," his father replied. "You hear what I say. Don't trouble me with any more of this."

"It's like my blooming luck!" cried Osborne, as his friend sat beside him, ruefully beholding him. "They'll say I'm shirking it; but I'd give a thousand gold *mohurs*, if I had 'em, to go to-night."

"I'd give the world."

"Oh, but you are different; it aint your business, and it *is* mine. I want to come to the front, and here's this beastly fever keeping me in the rear."

"Like my spelling," groaned Will.

"But I mean to go, all the same; the fever be hanged! If I can get into my clothes, I know I can stick on a horse. Once I'm on good old *Ushrufee*, I'm bound to go. Lend us a hand, old fellow, and I'll try now."

So Will lent him a hand; he even lent him two hands; but Osborne was no sooner hauled on his feet than he heeled over head foremost, and, but for his friend's support, would have gone to the ground.

All Will's strength was taxed to get the poor young fellow back on his *charpoy*, and when he was able to speak again, his mournful words were:

"It's no go, old fellow," while actual tears fell down his lemon-colored cheeks.

At that moment the assembly bugle sounded, and they heard the charger come round to the veranda.

Will started up.

"It's all but dark," he said, while his eyes glittered and his voice thrilled; "let me go in your place—it will be dark when we

assemble ; no one will think it isn't you. You shall have the medal I'm safe to win. Say yes—say yes ! ”

As he spoke, he began pulling out the gay uniform.

Osborne laughed. “ Don't be a mad ass,” he said faintly.

“ Say yes ; say yes,” cried Will impatiently.

“ Not my best,” was the reply. “ My oldest. Don't be a fool. Call *Bearer* for my oldest.”

For an instant Will considered. Was it worth while masquerading in those shabby old clothes ? The next instant he was laughing at himself, and getting into the despised garments rapidly, then he turned and stood by his chum's bedside.

“ Look ! ” he cried, “ they fit me to a T. Would you know it wasn't yourself ? No one will see the difference, if only I keep silent. Here, *Bearer*.”

The man came in and started. Here was his sahib up and dressed, and yet ill and in bed ! Surely it was the work of *Shaitán*. Then he saw how it was, and, with the quickness of his class, accepted the situation as a matter of course ; then Will made him understand no one was to be allowed to enter his master's quarters, and to all questions he was to give the same answer—“ Osborne Sahib was with his men.”

The short after-light was over when Will clattered off to parade, and the stars' light was unaided by the moon ; the few torches at the assembling-place revealed but faintly the figures of the men, their features were obscured by the shadows from their *pugrees*, and they spoke in very low tones to avoid the notice of loiterers who might be in the Lal Rajah's pay. Will's frequent presence in the cavalry lines stood him in good stead now. He knew the drill as well as the soldiers, knew his proper place, and understood the orders which went rapidly among them. His clever charger knew all about it too. He carried his accustomed weight, and felt no difference in his rider, so there was no difficulty with him. The officers, standing about watching the detachment off, accepted Will as the real Simon Pure, and his own father, passing by, kindly congratulated him on his recovery. Will's heart was very shaky when his father came close, but when his disguise was not perceived, his spirits rose, and he felt equal to anything. The doctor put his hand on his, and remonstrated with him.

“ You aint fit,” he said ; “ indeed you aint. You'll come back in the ambulance, you young fool ! ”

Osborne's captain came next. “ I say, youngster,” he murmured,

“are you sure you can keep up ? Better reconsider, and turn back. We shall be seven or eight hours in the saddle.”

A grunt in reply was accepted as an answer, and the two or three other men who accosted him before they started were content with as little.

Absolute silence was enjoined as they rode on through the night. The solace of a pipe was denied them, and only one halt was permitted, when each man refreshed himself with the scanty bite and drink he carried on his saddle, and each horse's mouth was washed out. During that brief half-hour at midnight Mr. Vernon held a whispered parley with the officers to make sure each knew his part. Will kept well behind him, when he was spoken to. It was better to be considered unmannerly, he thought, than to be found out. Then the march was continued, for the most part, over grass-grown tracks, with many an ugly boulder in the way, where the difficulty of getting the horses round or over it made the journey longer than need be. For a while they followed the highroad, where the galloping letter-carrier flew past them blowing his tuneless horn for travellers to get out of his way, and to scare wild beasts from his track ; but they soon returned to the paths, and, again, only the irritating call of the countless jackals, the snapping laugh of the hyena, the sharp bark of the fox, and the incessant sibilant song of the cricket tribe were heard ; the monotony of these recurrent sounds being occasionally relieved by the sharp squeak of a musk rat, the flying-fox, and the whine of a far-off village pariah.

Will's excitement kept him awake and alert. Here was an adventure indeed, and as yet he had not thought how it was to end. It was not till the night was well on, and the cry of a watchman in some unseen village told that the dawn was nigh, that he began to wonder whether he should be discovered before the business of the attack commenced ; that his father would forbid him to advance with the men if the daylight disclosed the fraud was a certainty, and he could only pray that at the first streak of dawn the men should be ordered forward.

As the *koelas* and the *mynas* began their morning serenade, the little party reached a narrow defile half-choked up with undergrowth and fragments of rock, up which, pretty strongly palisaded with rough, sharp-pointed wooden stakes, the Lal fort stood, and here a halt was made. Then the commissioner, attended by a man *bearing a white flag* and closely followed by his little army, moved *up the defile, keeping along the shadowed side until, after a weary*

mile's march, they found themselves facing the stronghold of the turbulent rajah.

Mr. Vernon had been a visitor in the fort many a time in the days of the present man's father, and he knew exactly where his band would find an unseen waiting-place, while he for the last time tried pacific measures.

In a grove of splendid mangoes the detachment remained within sound of the fort, yet completely hidden from view—each man watching with acute expectancy while Mr. Vernon sent one of his civil officers with a couple of native attendants to summon the rajah to attend him. The sun had not yet risen when the messengers returned.

They had not been allowed to enter the gate, and the answer given was that the rajah would come and see the commissioner "some day."

Almost as the man was speaking, the boom of a gun, fired from the fort, made some of the horses plunge.

The commissioner's blood was up. There was no help for it, such lawless impertinence must be punished. If Rajah Lal Singh would not come to him, he would go to the rajah, and at once; but, first, the gun must be silenced.

Volunteers were called. Lieutenant Osborne and half a dozen men were ready; their horses were secured, and they stole away on foot, the darkness still favoring their movements.

Meantime a trumpet was sounded, and the jingling of accoutrements was encouraged in the hope that the people in the fort should have their attention diverted as long as possible. When time had been allowed for the volunteers to scramble up the hill, the rest of the party rode openly out of shelter, taking the proper roadway leading to the fort, and the first streaks of the rising sun fell upon the curious old tower with its tiny, shuttered windows, its weather-stained walls, its untidy surroundings of the pigsty-like retainers' and servants' houses, its one sacred tree littered with colored rags to charm evil spirits away, its many dunghills, and its dirty pools of unsavory liquid.

No man was visible, but sounds as if the garrison was alarmed and preparing were audible enough. As the light increased, the soldiers could see the muzzle of the gun that had been fired turned upon them. A volley just then must have considerably thinned their ranks, but Osborne and his men had managed their task; *shouts were heard—English hurrahs and Indian equivalents.*

Then the muzzle of the gun was no longer visible ; it had been turned round upon the fort, and Mr. Vernon and his party rode on ; the strain was over.

Will and his men, who believed they followed their daring young officer, had gained the summit of the little hill, crawling up bent double, and taking advantage of the bushes and high coarse grass to avoid detection by the enemy. Will had positively no thoughts as he scrambled onward, except the desire to keep ahead of the soldiers ; the one determination to act as he believed his friend would have acted, alone possessed him. For the time he was really what he represented himself to be—the sub-lieutenant eager to win his spurs. Father and mother and home ties had ceased to be for him as he gripped the grass tufts to help himself on, and occasionally hushed his Irish sergeant, who kept bursting into stifled laughter at the chance of hot work before him. Getting over the sharp-pointed palisading was no easy matter, nor did they manage it without giving the alarm ; and as one by one they dropped down into the huge compound, the light was strong enough to show it was swarming with half-clothed men, evidently taken by surprise, and angrily giving and resenting advice to each other. The thud of the heavily booted little band jumping down into their very midst caused a loud tumult of wrath. How could they tell there were not dozens more following ? Will pulled out his sword—the sword he had so often flourished in fun in his chum’s quarters—and, with a faint remembrance of a picture representing a young officer striking an attitude in the midst of a tumultuous gathering of friend and foe, with burning houses for a background, and dead and dying lying around, he held it aloft, and with a loud “Come on, lads !” dashed forward to the gun.

His unaccustomed arm could have done little before these practised native followers of the rajah’s had not his men backed him up with stout arms and hearts, and had not the enemy believed every instant would bring further succor to the English. With shouts of derision the soldiers seized the gun, and almost instantly it faced its former owners, who fell back rapidly, leaving a wide space around the little band, not daring to provoke the slaughter by using their fire-arms.

In the momentary pause Will felt a strange faintness come over him ; without knowing it at the time, he had torn his arm in getting over the paling, and a warm little stream of blood was trick-

ling over his hand. Angry shame possessed him at the idea of a girl's weakness overcoming him in his assumed character ; he bound his kerchief tightly round the wound, and set his heart to repel the faintness ; fortunately his sergeant had a drop of spirit in his flask, and made him swallow some, and the boy felt strong again ; but he had betrayed himself, and Will saw the man's surprise.

"Don't say a word, Murphy," he whispered ; "let me do my best." There was no time for more, a sudden rush came upon them, and in another instant the little party would have been overpowered had not the rajah appeared on the scene, and ordered his men to fall back ; but Will had had the opportunity to win his spurs. A big turbaned fellow, with a curved knife, had singled out Murphy, while he was just replacing his flask in his breast, and unready, and the weapon was descending when Will, braced up afresh, put forth all his strength, and warded off the threatening blade.

Then there was a sudden calm, as the natives obeyed orders and retired, leaving the gun still surrounded by its captors. Neither the commissioner nor the rajah had any desire to hurt each other, and as the gates were opened, and the latter humbly salaamed before his "Mighty Lord, his Protector and his Father," the former was greatly relieved all had ended so well.

The soldiers sat like statues on their horses while a brief colloquy between the ruling powers was held ; then the gun was spiked, the mutinous retainers heaped their knives and firelocks together, and retired to the further side of the compound unarmed, while an English guard watched the discarded weapons, and a rest of some hours was given to men and horses. In the early afternoon the assembly rang out, and the penitent rajah, with a very small attendance, rode down from his fort, prepared to accompany the commissioner back to cantonments, there to swear friendship with his brother rajah.

By this time it was pretty well known among the men that Lieutenant Osborne was represented by Will Vernon. He was no stranger to them ; many a time had he attended stables, and ridden out with them, and among Osborne's troop his was almost as familiar a figure as the young officer's. His plucky raid on the gun, and gallant defence of Murphy, were the one topic of conversation during that hot noontide rest, and many were the conjectures as to what the commissioner would say when he heard of his eldest son's escapade.

"And pore fellow, he won't get nothink for it," was the frequent comment. "If he'd ever took the shilling, he might 'a' claimed the Victoria Cross," while Will, wearied out and weak, lay in the shade soundly sleeping a dreamless sleep, till the assembly bugle roused him.

As Osborne's representative, he was bound to take his position with his troop, and there he stationed himself, with flushed face and downcast eyes, dreading he knew not what.

Some wild idea that he could be punished was in his mind, that his folly might even rebound on his father, and cover him, too, with shame; and as he heard the commanding officer getting nearer and nearer, and knew he was narrowly inspecting each man as he answered to his name, he was sick with apprehension. His charger seemed to share his agitation, he fidgeted on his feet, shook his head, and made a most unnecessary jingle. His rider felt all eyes would perforce be drawn to him—the exposure would be indeed complete. Another moment of loudly beating heart and blurred vision, and then he heard the question he so dreaded sternly asked of him:

"Who are you, sir?"

This was too much. Poor Will had no mental picture to copy on this occasion; all his *sang-froid* and his cheery self-confidence completely deserted him, as the voice he was accustomed to hear greeting him kindly and cordially, now treated him as a stranger, worse still, as an intruder. He could not be defiant, he could but be humble; and as the question was repeated, as if the speaker's patience was used up, and he could tell without seeing that every man was bending forward to watch what was going on, he blurted out what he felt was the truth, and therefore the only thing left for him to say; and scarcely raising his crimson face, he answered meekly, as he saluted:

"An impostor, sir."

Could Will have seen the smile on his questioner's face, he would have been quickly reassured. He hardly believed his ears when the next words came:

"No, sir; a hero!"

The commissioner had come up, and had checked his horse to witness the little scene. He had only just been told of his boy's gallantry, and had been charmed with his humility, and as Will—*recalled to life* by the unexpected reply—looked up in sudden relief, *his father's glowing eyes met his.*

The look was enough to restore Will to himself. He straightened his bent figure, and dared once more to smile, while the commanding officer added :

"Keep your place in the troop, sir ; the men need not be ashamed to obey you. Lieutenant Osborne sent a worthy substitute."

As he paused, the soldiers broke into a cheer, which their officers took up and repeated, and Will rode back to cantonments with proud glad face, no longer dreading the light of day.

Thus the first report had named Lieutenant Osborne as the hero of the attack. Then the commissioner was confused with his son ; but very soon the facts were known and spread, and long before Mrs. Vernon heard she might rejoice for her own boy's sake instead of another's, Will's spurs were assured.

Sergeant Murphy's report of Will's undaunted conduct was repeated in the official papers sent up to headquarters, and while Will received a semi-official acknowledgment of his services (afterward framed and glazed), his father was asked to name some more substantial reward. Mr. Vernon was too well known as a valuable servant for his son's conduct to be lightly passed over, and the Indian Government was quite willing to show its appreciation of his services.

The commissioner did not ask much. He merely stated his boy's passion for the army, and his inability to pass the necessary examinations ; he also showed the young man's otherwise good capacity, his quickness in acquiring languages, and his blameless conduct. It was little enough to beg the favor of a direct commission in the Indian cavalry, and so it was felt ; and after a merely nominal examination, expressly framed to meet his weakest point, William Vernon's name appeared in the next gazette as having successfully passed into her Majesty's Indian Army as sub-lieutenant to do duty with the Prince of Wales' Regiment of Horse, stationed at Wattibuldi.

If there had been a lurking thought of Annie Lightup left in Will's memory, it went quickly into the background now. What a young fool he had been, he thought ; what a merciful deliverance he had had ; henceforth his kind memories were for the sensible father, with his bare arms and tray of tartlets, instead of the silly, dressy daughter, and while this self-accusation was fresh, he wrote a long letter to George, bidding him beware of making a like mistake. "Such cheek !" was George's comment ; "as if we were all born idiots !" Nevertheless George shared in Will's fame ; his rooms

were thronged, when it was known in his college how the Vernon who had done such a plucky thing was his brother. The illustrated papers had a likeness of the "distinguished son of a distinguished father"—as but a few months earlier George, too, had been named—and at Cotley a whole holiday was given, and the townspeople had chuckled over the fame of "another of our boys," while photographs of Will, when he was a smiling schoolboy, were sold in his native town, and people nudged each other to look at his mother when she walked out. Far away in Hong Kong harbor Fabian read the story in the gunroom, and all the middies wished themselves in Lieutenant Vernon's shoes. Fluffy spent his last ten shillings in sweets for the mess, and three cheers were given by the appreciative youths in honor of the "celebrated" brother.

"And he'll be a colonel, after all," said Dimple, who greatly delighted his little brothers by twisting the best teacloth round his head as a turban, and brandishing the poker in imitation of the "great black soldier who might have killed everyone if Will hadn't pitched into him first."

Arthur was found weeping under his bed-clothes that night. He had been so impressed by Dalrymple's turban that he feared it might appear at his bedside.

"A real cornet of horse!" Great-aunt Jane exclaimed. "Well, I hope his father will keep him in his own regiment. So he's taken my advice at last, I expect, and made him his A. D. C."

Mrs. William Vernon was the least surprised of all at her eldest son's sudden exaltation; indeed, she felt almost affronted when friends expressed any astonishment. "He always had his wits about him," she would say; "indeed, Dr. Latten, the headmaster, thought very highly of Will in everything but spelling; his testimonials are first-rate; but you know Will did not care for classics. We have often regretted we did not put him in the modern school. No, it is just what I should have expected of him. So daring, too, wasn't it?"

Great-aunt Jane delighted young Mrs. Vernon at that time, for the old lady liked to have the story repeated at every visit; most of it being forgotten from day to day. Never before had the happy mother thought so highly of the old aunt's goodness of heart.

When George came home to rejoice with the family he took silent notice of the change in Urania. She was very quiet, and *there was a saddened expression in her beautiful eyes. She was constantly with Mrs. Lancing, going about among the poor.*

"Looks almost like a nun," George thought ; but no one else seemed aware of any change. She had long ceased to giggle and whisper with her sisters, and they no longer expected her company. They had all been home for the holidays, and returned at their own request. Mrs. Marleon was out of health, and lived a very quiet life. They lived in London, and consequently the girls could not go out by themselves, and their father was in a restless, irritable state, and hardly noticed his growing daughters. He was longing to be back in India, and in his heart was an ever-deepening fear that his wife's health was breaking up, and that a return for her was impossible. Mrs. Vernon knew it all, and was an invaluable friend to both ; but the girls guessed nothing.

"Papa was so peppery," said the younger ones, "and mamma so stand-off ;" and Urania, who had never been treated as a friend by either parent, clung all the more to the kind family at Cotley.

Mr. Doughty was changed, too. The work at Cotley was too pleasant and easy to satisfy his conscience ; he had never forgotten the little missionary's sermon, and when his brother sailed away to a foreign mission he became dissatisfied and afraid for himself. Even Mrs. Lancing was unaware of this inward conflict going on ; it was to George, one evening they were spending together in the curate's lodgings, that he told his ever growing scruples, and from George he received the sympathy he craved.

"If I were a parson, which I never shall be," said George, "I should go at missionary work when I was young, and come back to quiet England when I was an old fellow. It isn't fair on the old ones to let them frizzle on in Asia and Africa ; they ought to come home, and be coddled in such a curacy as yours. It must be rather slow for a young fellow like you here."

The curate laughed. He knew what George meant, though he would have worded the sense differently. It did the young man good to talk openly to the boy who judged without experience, and laid down the law with an undergraduate's high hand. It is nice to place one's confidence sometimes in an irresponsible person ; it is nice to know his inferior judgment need not be taken into account ; there is relief in merely stating one's crude notions to someone neither clever enough nor superior enough to make one eat one's own words eventually.

What is pleasanter than a safe listener ? And George listened, backing up his friend's half-formed plans, admiring his self-sacrifice, *and content to advise without responsibility ; all, too, with*

an amusing unconscious self-sufficiency peculiar to clever young freshmen.

So George was the first to learn that Mr. Doughty had decided to leave Cotley, and it was from him Urania heard of it.

George was startled by the girl's sudden animation; but she turned her back upon him as she asked :

"When is he going? I am glad."

"Well, you are queer! Glad to get rid of him?"

"Glad he sees his responsibilities." Then she turned upon George with flashing eyes. "Yes; any old man can do curate's work here; he's doing what he ought to do, I think, giving up his best years—like good, darling Mr. Truman!"

George sank into a chair and laughed contemptuously. "Darling Mr. Truman!" he cried. "Oh, I like that. I shall tell Aunt Issy to look out, when darling Mr. Truman comes home. Will good old Doughty be 'darling,' too, when he takes to the mission work?"

Once more she turned her back on him; but even her ears were scarlet, as he could see.

"George, I execrate you!" she cried.

Another loud laugh was his reply, while she, keeping her face turned from him, walked indignantly out of the room. George was very angry, though he laughed, and for the rest of his stay he treated her civilly without appearing distant, while the friendly fun he had been accustomed to have with her was transferred to her sisters, who were perfectly willing to have a flirtation on the shortest notice.

Mr. Doughty, having put his convictions into words, felt the strength to carry them out into deeds; his vicar offered him more money to stay, and tried to prove to him that real work was real work in all circumstances, and the willing worker could always find enough to do without going out of his way to seek it—the young man was immovable, he had already arranged to go to a training college for a few months, and his services had been accepted by the Society of Foreign Missions. Mrs. Lancing attempted no argument against it; she was shocked and yet pleased. He was acting as her Leonard would have acted, she said; and if she were a little younger, she would go out as a missionary, too.

"And yet," said Isoline sadly, "you would not hear of *my* going out, some years ago."

"That is altogether different ; you are a feckless body, and I'm not," her sister replied ; and gentle Isoline could not continue the argument.

CHAPTER XIII

A SAD ENDING

THINGS turned out as Mrs. Vernon had feared. Her husband did not think well to throw up his good appointment. He wrote of "just one more year"; but her heart failed her that just one more year would be repeated when the weary second year came to an end, and she could not but say he was doing right. His presence near Will, too, was a cause for her thankfulness. Will was showing extravagant notions. His popularity in his regiment was great, and as the commissioner's eldest son, Lieutenant Vernon considered he had to keep up a certain style. He was particular in the matter of chargers, and thought a smart high dogcart, driven tandem fashion, particularly suitable for him.

"Another year will find him wiser," his father hoped. "He is not unreasonable, when he and I go over his expenses together. The longer we can be within touch, the more likelihood there is that he will keep straight, and recognize the benefit of living within his means. He is a good, affectionate lad, but too ready to be led astray, because he can't say 'No.'"

Therefore, for Will's dear sake, his mother wrote out a cheerful acquiescence in her husband's decision.

George came over to hear the curate's farewell sermon one Sunday night. The church was very full ; his great admirers, the Grammar-school boys, were there in force. All the Vernon family were there, and the Marleon girls. Urania kept her thickly spotted veil down, and never once looked off her book all through the service till the preacher entered the pulpit ; then she looked at him, and as her eyes turned away, they fell upon George watching her attentively ; but his attention was diverted as soon as Mr. Doughty gave out his text :

"The Master is come, and calleth for thee."

To those who knew the young man well, it was easy to under-

stand how he mentally changed that personal pronoun, and read himself the lecture he so ably preached ; only just toward the end did he dwell, and very lightly, on his new plans. The Master had called him, as he was always calling everyone to come away from sloth and self, from ease and pleasure, to work in his vineyard now. The Master was calling—if they would but listen—ever and always to those who were doing well, to do better ; and to those who were trying to do their best, to continue ; but to those who were content to let the days and years glide on, while they only now and then gave a helping hand—a mere cup of cold water, just to rid themselves of further importunity, not because they recognized the voice—to them the ceaseless call might grow soon too faint to hear. “The Master is not coming,” he repeated, “he is come, and calleth for thee. He says, ‘Come, for all things are *now* ready.’” And then, as he concluded, amid perfect stillness, he added, “You and I may never meet again on earth. God grant we may all hear these words at the last, soothing our fears of death—greeting us as we enter into that mysterious hereafter—‘The Master is come, and calleth for thee.’”

George had no thought for Urania again that evening ; he walked straight out of church by his mother’s side, and hardly spoke the whole way home. Had he been of a weaker nature, he would have shed tears in the darkness ; as it was, a veil seemed to have been torn from his thoughts. University honors all at once became mean things. College distinctions, literary rank, became as nothing—the shortness of life, the weakness of humanity, the vastness of suffering, the immensity of sin, came uppermost. What signified the greatest intellectual efforts beside the reality of the demoniacal bondage which holds the greater part of the human race ? What was the meaning of, “Freely ye have received, freely give” ? Surely it meant something more than almsgiving, which costs many people so little. What does earthly ambition bring to the soul that strives only for it ? What are talents and intellects, and social rank and riches, but God’s opportunities given for a season ?—mines of pure ore, if used in his service, but downward steps to perdition, if used for self. Never before had he stopped to consider the why and wherefore of his life, the present had been enough for his consideration ; to shine in college and on the river, and in the cricket and football field, to get as much fun as he could without neglecting the studies he pursued, because he wished to *make his way* above that of his fellows—these had been his life’s

aims ; but to-night, with his friend's words and earnest glances before him, these seemed nothing but shadows. Reality and responsibility were blotting them out. He thought of Doughty's fun, his comic songs, his jokes, his schoolboy tricks, his pride in his strength at games and athletic competitions ; yet all the while he must have been full of yearnings and holy desires which had culminated in this unexpected turn. "He must be right," he meditated. "He's gone through the thing, and studied it—served his apprenticeship as it were ; and if he's right—we—I—must be wrong."

He went moodily to bed, he could not discuss the sermon at supper—it was too sacred a subject, too much like signing his own doom ; but, then, when he awoke in the morning, and the pleasant daylight flooded the room, the dark fears retreated. "It is a parson's business to touch one up a bit," he told himself, and went back to college to strive and struggle his hardest for the things of time.

As at school, so at college, he was a man of note—a bookworm, and yet a sportsman—always at lectures, and first in the classroom—yet the boast of his college in the field and on the river. But no one grudged him his triumphs, for he was—in the language of his companions—"A good all-round un." And when young Doughty went away from England, without more than half a dozen friends to see him off, and wish him God-speed, George could not spare a day to say good-by to him ; he was too busy working for his degree—a mathematical degree—which was to him just then the one and only distinction worth gaining.

The annual summer sports of the Grammar-school boys were held the last week in July, just before the Long Vacation commenced, and they were always events of immense importance to the growing boys and girls of the place. This year's were especially interesting to Dalrymple, who hoped to have passed into Sandhurst before they came round again. They would, therefore, be virtually the last in which he would take part as a schoolboy, and he wished to be very successful, so as to beat the record. His little brothers were astonished, when Dimple began dieting, to see him refuse butter and cakes and sweets, and eat meat of a sanguinary appearance. Dimple was very strict and particular as to the quantity and quality of his food for at least a month before the great day ; he ran miles in the scantiest of garments in the small hours of *the morning*, and was said to have muscles of iron, and

the kangaroo's skill in leaping. Harold was so bitten with the like mania that he, too, went into what he called "railwaying," a joke at which his smaller brother could not laugh enough—and "did" regular runs in the garden daily, besides taking wonderful jumps over the water-pot and the rake—the latter being held higher and higher at each attempt by Toby, who invariably lowered it just as his brother sprang. Dimple felt pretty certain of being successful in the races and the high jump, if not at throwing the cricket-ball; but there was one drawback—his calfless legs; if he could have run in trousers, he would have been quite happy; but the thought of girls laughing at his sticks of legs was agonizing. Last year, of course, his legs had been no fatter; but "girls" had then no share in his thoughts. It was otherwise now, and he felt that, should he see scorn in Tanny Marleon's face, even if he were very near the winning-post, he must fail. He had heard her opinion.

"Did you ever see such beastly dollops of legs as Steed's?" he had asked of her one day, when they were watching a practice; and she had answered:

"He would make a famous Jeames"—an evasive reply he could make nothing of.

His mother had comforted him by declaring growing boys ought not to have calves well developed. "Breadth comes only when the height stops," she assured him; and though he urged that Steed had not done growing, for his Eton-jacket sleeves looked shorter every Sunday, she would have it, he was the exception to prove the rule. However, there was no help for it, and when the time came, and he had to put off his long overcoat, and stand with tight-fitting vest, short drawers, and bare arms and legs, he looked no worse than the rest of the striplings, and in the ardor of the competition he forgot to consider his personal appearance. The field was crowded with spectators. Even Great-aunt Jane was there in a bath-chair, well to the front, with her numerous relations around her; her teeth were well settled, and her rings glittered under the old-fashioned black-lace gloves she had worn on state occasions such as this sort for many a year past. Mrs. Vernon, senior, and her daughters, were there, as they had been year after year ever since Richard and William had first gone to school; generation after generation of "old boys" had come to review the familiar scenes, and there were always Mrs. Vernon and her daughters to welcome them. No one in Cotley could imagine the school-field on "sports" day without these familiar faces, and, when they brought

a contingent of pretty young girls, they were doubly pleasant to the "first."

The Marleon girls were dressed in pretty white frocks and broad-brimmed hats, fresh and dainty as only English girls can be. Tanny and Anny had flowers on their breasts of colors to match their favorites, and Tanny, with coquettish grace, wore two little bunches, one of Dalrymple's colors, the other of someone's who had waited for her at the entrance gate, and handed it solemnly to her as she entered.

Dimple spotted this second bouquet at once ; it was "that beast Steed's !" He soon revenged himself. He and Steed were the two who distanced all the other runners in the half-mile race, and loud were the cries of, "Go it, Skinny ! go it, Fatty !" from the different admirers: but Skinny won an easy victory, as he did again in the mile race later on. Indeed, "black and gold" was on his mettle ; he was second in throwing the cricket-ball, second in the egg-and-plate race, first in the high jump, first in the obstruction race, and first in the sack race. His mother, in her prettiest summer dress, declared her eyes ached with watching her boy's long thin legs whirl round the track, his wary face looking out for the moment when the spurt should be necessary, his bony arms and clenched hands all helping to success. In the tug-of-war his was the strong pull which again and again drew the other side over the line ; and as Tanny expressed it, there was a smile on the face of the tiger, as he flung himself down at the last, all but dead beat. The little boys began their record on this occasion. Harold, in a miniature suit like his elder brother's, won in a small boys' race, and Arthur, who had not "trained," as he afterward said, came in last.

"But it was a good last !" he cried complacently, as his grandmother received him on his return from his failure with consoling caresses. "That big man told me it was a good last ; and Dimple said he'd never seen a better ; and I aint tired a bit." While Harold strutted up with infinite self-esteem, exclaiming, "The other fellows hadn't been sucking lemons. I told them they couldn't expect to win. But oh !" he added, his bright, chubby face suddenly becoming rueful, "they was sour."

Dalrymple reclining on the grass in the shade, waiting for the prizes to be given, was a little self-important, too ; he was severely critical on some of the boys, and made facetious remarks on their lady friends.

"There are a lot of pretty faces here," Tomkins, the tallest boy in the school, said. "Those Marleon girls are stunners. They're cousins of yours, Vernon, aint they?"

"My mother's the prettiest here," said Dimple, with much assumption. .

"Your mother! Well, she's very pretty," was the rejoinder; "but one doesn't count mothers. I mean girls."

"She was the most beautiful woman in India," Dalrymple added.

"Oh, I say!"

"She was!" Up he started, defiantly facing the speaker.

"Oh, keep quiet," Tomkins expostulated. "Perhaps she was. Who says she wasn't? But how do they know she was? At any rate, she would bless you for bragging about her, you bet!"

Dimple was silent and ashamed. His mother needed no lies invented to proclaim her worth. What a stupid fool he was, he told himself. He felt ashamed to go up to the table covered with prizes, and utterly unworthy to receive cup after cup and sweet, approving words and ringing cheers as he passed to and fro, adding to his prizes, till he found himself burthened with more than he could carry home. Tanny was willing enough now to show herself *his* admirer only; she managed to lose Steed's flowers as soon as she knew Dimple was the hero of the day, and there were cups enough for her to be pressed into the service of carrying one or two for him, thereby publicly showing her approval of his prowess. Great-aunt Jane took some on her lap in the chair, and said it seemed only the other day she had carried the same sort of things for his grandfather in his school-days. It was delightful to all the women-relations to have this champion escorting them out of the field, while the eyes and tongues of the crowd around them were all busy watching and talking about him. He had his overcoat on again, and so walked comfortably beside Constantia, while the rest buzzed around him, a triumphant procession indeed; but they had hardly got clear of the throng when one of Mrs. Vernon's servants met her with a telegram from Mr. Marleon.

"The girls are to come up as quickly as possible; their mother is very ill."

A train to town started so soon after this summons that there was no time to change their clothes first, and in their pretty gala garments, their fun and happiness suddenly quenched, they hastened off with Mrs. Lancing.

At that last supreme hour, when her girls stood at her bedside, Mrs. Marleon seemed to realize her mistaken notions ; their softened, blooming faces, their frightened eyes bent upon her, their shrinking at the sight of her changed appearance, were all read aright by her widening mind. Strangers had succeeded where she had failed ; it was a natural consequence she should find only pity when she needed their tenderest love.

Death brings knowledge and wisdom to the startled soul before he takes it out of its humanity ; but, alas ! too late for the lamp to be trimmed afresh on earth.

Each girl kissed her—a duty kiss—and said, “Poor mamma,” or, “Dear mother, I am so sorry for you ;” and she clearly understood what that “for you” inferred. There was no sobbing pleading not to leave “me” ; no agonized, “What can *I* do without you ?” No ; only “Poor mamma” was going to die. The blank her absence would make in her girls’ lives would hardly be perceptible, and she attempted no farewell sentiment.

“Were you at a wedding ?” she said. “You all look so bonny ?”

Urania began to explain, but her mother could not take any interest, and the girl stopped talking, suddenly conscious of the strong power stealing over her. She looked up startled at her father, who stood on the opposite side of the bed, and the suffering in his face loosened her own unnatural calm. In the grief of this kinder, more sympathetic parent, she could feel the reality of what was going on, and, passing hastily round, she linked her hands about his arm, and broke into irrepressible weeping.

Her sisters were shocked. “Don’t be so silly,” Tanny whispered ; but the dying woman understood. She smiled at her husband as he put his arm caressingly round the girl, and made an effort to say something, but it was too late.

For another hour she lay, her face turned toward her husband, her eyes gradually losing their loving expression, and then in a speechless awe which had never before troubled their careless spirits, the girls were taken from the room, motherless.

Some relations, who were waiting in the drawing room, offered to take the girls home with them till after the funeral, but the two younger clung to Mrs. Lancing, and implored her to take them back with her.

Urania went to her father, and asked what they should do. He was sitting in his study, and told her to thank his cousins, and

ask them to excuse him seeing them. He thought it best the girls should return to Cotley. "I am best alone," he added.

Urania stole away and gave his message. Titania and Constantia were eager to go at once. Urania hesitated; she felt she at least ought to stay; but she dreaded being left in the death-stricken, silent house. She felt her utter inability to fulfil the necessary duties to the strange servants, too. She said something of this, and Mrs. Lancing quickly reassured her.

"My dear love," she cried, "I am so glad you see your duty! It is plain enough. Don't think of your own weakness, but of your poor father's need. Suppose I telegraph home, and tell them not to expect any of us till to-morrow? We'll tell your father we shall be glad to rest. By to-morrow we shall all be calmer."

So it was settled, and when, later on, Urania took a nicely prepared dinner to her father, and refused to go till he ate it, she was amply rewarded by the look of relief with which he greeted her.

"This is kind," he said two or three times; "we shall all be rested to-morrow." And when they all went in to say good-night, he again said it was "nice to have them there."

Mrs. Lancing always prided herself on her knowledge of "men's ways," and when Mr. Marleon appeared at breakfast, with a wan, stricken face, and found the room bright with fresh flowers, while the drawn blinds were but suitable for the hot summer day, she spared him all troublesome questions as to how he had slept and what he would eat.

Urania sat in her mother's place; but Mrs. Lancing was at her elbow, and showed her how much cream and sugar to add to her father's tea, while Titania had been instructed how to help him to the delicately fried fish, and Constantia had prepared the hot roll, and picked out the fresh, sufficiently ripened banana and greengages.

As Mr. Marleon did his best to accept the quiet attentions, he gradually grew more cheerful. Without knowing what he ate, he felt the food was grateful and pleasant, and the unspoken solicitude of his children could not, he felt, be repulsed. In an intonation of one of their voices, in the expression of a feature, and particularly in the shape of Urania's eyes, he saw the dead mother, and liked to see it. Mrs. Lancing's presence acted as a wholesome restraint, too; and during the business discussion that followed, concerning the funeral arrangements, he found her a practical and *wise friend*.

His wife, who had long known her case must end fatally soon,

though at the last it was almost sudden, had settled what was to be done, as far as possible ; but the future of the girls had been left undecided. She had not supposed they could be other than a burden to her husband, and had merely suggested they might be left where they were as long as the Vernons cared to have them. Her principal care had been for him, who was not a man of resources, and she had advised him to go back among the old scenes in India for a time. But already his heart was beginning to turn to his children, and his plans to extend to a settled home with them.

He would have been the last to suppose so, but there was great relief, too, in the cheerful, healthy presence of Mrs. Lancing. Her comely grace impressed him pleasantly ; her judicious affection for the girls, so different to the ailing mother's constant fault-finding, pleased and interested him ; and when Urania suggested she and her sisters wished to remain with him until he gave up the house, and asked if they might ask Mrs. Lancing to stay as well, he gratefully acquiesced.

Old Aunt Jane said it wouldn't be proper for a young creature like Gertrude to stay with a widower ; but Mrs. Lancing laughed at the notion. She would stay till after the funeral, she said. Scandal could hardly attack a poor man while his wife was unburied. After that, she would return to her parish work.

Meantime, Mrs. William Vernon went off to Oxford to witness George's possible triumph. He had told his mother he hoped to gain his degree in mathematics, but feared he might not be strong enough. At this time he was very undecided about his future profession. He had never fancied the army, and had demurred at his father's repeated desire that he should try to enter the Civil Service of India. He hated desk work, he said ; he didn't want to spend his life stewing in India ; indeed, there was always some reason why he should go his own way, though he did not know what that way was to be. His father had pinned his hopes on his clever second son. He believed his own profession was most suitable, and he foresaw no limit to the height to which George might rise in it ; but the lad pooh-poohed. He protested his father overrated him.

"Because I'm not quite such a dummy as the colonel," he wrote, "father magnifies me into a prodigy. Fluffy is much cleverer than I am. I'll make up my mind before next term. Perhaps I shall be a parson,"

On this the father wrote, almost sternly :

"George was not fit for Holy Orders. To be a parson required a decided feeling that it was the one and only desirable profession—not a mere chance choice among many. It required private means, too, to be of real use in a parish, and some connection. Altogether he bade him be convinced *that* was not his proper rôle, and to try to fix his intentions on a profession in every way suitable—his father's."

He was very reticent over his opinion when this letter reached him. His mother was unable to get at his real feelings ; and now she went off to see him, with some sort of fear lest her boy's prospects were being blighted by some unforeseen circumstances.

Her mother-in-law saw her off by the train, and bade her "Keep up. One can't expect everything to run smoothly from first to last," she said. "Boys change their ideas every month. If George fails this year, he'll succeed better next. Don't let him see your disappointment." But Amy's heart sank as she neared Oxford ; failure might have such a bad effect on her sensitive boy, though he should not know *she* felt it one iota ; he should have her fullest sympathy. The moment she saw him on the platform, she was glad she had come. He looked very worn, and the young face had positive lines. Like many another mother, she fumed against the mental overstrain modern necessity imposed upon still growing youths ; but the instant he saw her, he was radiant with delight, and the two drove off, careless of everything but that they were together.

"And what about your chance ?" she asked presently, when the joy of meeting was calming down.

"My chance ? I always told you not to build on it."

"Yes ; but you have often pretended you had no chance, dear, when you knew you were winning."

"Ah ! but things are different at a place like this."

"I know they are, and I shall only be disappointed for you, darling. I am quite sure you did your best. You must put your books away, and we'll all go off to the seaside."

She put her hand on his, and pressed it tenderly.

"The lists are out," he said, with a strange tremble in his voice.

"Never mind ; you shall see your name on the top another year !"

"I saw it just a while ago."

"Oh, then you have passed, you naughty boy?"

"Yes; and not so very badly, after all." He took her hands in his, and turned a smiling face upon her, as he added. "Things are never so bad but they might be worse, you know. I'm in the Tripos."

"George!"

CHAPTER XIV

THE BURRA SAHIB

"WHAT a lucky family they are!" said some of the Cotleyites, when the news of another victory of a Vernon boy reached them. Will's photographs were still in the windows, and Dalrymple's glittering cups yet dazzled the memory; and now here was another brother casting fresh lustre on the ancient Grammar School. "You see they've a clever father," said one. "And the two grandfathers also," said another, "were both clever men. Old Lavender was a senior wrangler in his day, and a wonderful preacher. He thought nothing of giving an hour-and-half's sermon." "Ah, well! it's all accounted for, though it is often said boys take after the mother, girls after the father."

No one thought how much was owing to the shield of the prayers put up daily, sometimes hourly, for "the wise and understanding heart" which, once given, brings all other good with it.

At the breaking-up of the Grammar School, the head-master announced that the holidays would be lengthened by a week, on account of the credit conferred on the school by their late school-fellow, George Vernon. Then followed a list of the great things he had done at school and college, and when that was over, mighty cheers were repeated again and again for the hero.

George was much too bashful to show himself at Cotley. He let his mother return without him, and joined her when she was settled again at the seaside. In his first delight of success, he had rejoiced unfeignedly; but in a very short time his satisfaction faded. He was fêted and distinguished by the heads of colleges; the tutors spoke to him with a friendly interest truly gratifying, treating him as on an equality with themselves. Dons went out

of their way to suggest his future reading, and distinguished visitors begged to be introduced. But his simple mind saved him from self-laudation from the first, and soon the momentary gratification faded as he thought of the much there was yet to be done. What he had achieved was, after all, only as the promise of the greater achievements to be expected of one who had already done so much, and gone so far on the golden way. He had but given a hostage to fortune—had gained but a step on the ladder of fame. He could not have told in so many words why he was not altogether satisfied; but as he saw the long steep path lying ahead, vague thoughts puzzled him as to whether it was the right path, whether the Master was calling him up that way, or whether earthly mists were obscuring that other way—which Doughty had chosen—the puzzling fears which come to all earnest thinkers, young and old; to some to be the first glimmering of the steady light which shall grow brighter and brighter to the perfect day; to others—to the majority—to be shadowed by present cares and follies, till they cease even to glimmer.

Once more the former delightful life was lived in the little fishing village, in the chine of the high white cliffs of the Dorsetshire coast—boating, bathing, exploring, lying on the sand in the golden noon, sauntering on the cliff-tops in the sweet gloaming, striding over the heath to the inland towns and villages in the day's early freshness. Soothed and rested in his mother's companionship, playing with the little boys, and testing his strength against Dalrymple's George let his doubts and fears lie quiescent for the time—that is, he kept them down as much as possible; but the return to the little village church brought back the missionary's sermon, and made his dissatisfaction sometimes greater than he could bear. Sometimes he determined to do as his father desired, and work up for the Civil Service; then he thought he must take Orders, and work for a college living. He sickened at the thought of a curacy in London; but felt, if he were ordained, his conscience would force him to take just that most trying work.

When a wet day brought all these ideas in full force, when Dimple teased his little brothers, and George assumed too aggressive an air in rebuke, the mother needed all her sweet patience to keep a semblance of peace and unity. What wonderful tales she would tell the little boys, what deep interest she would take in Dalrymple's old bones, and the crawly creatures he called his *aquarium*.

All mothers worth the name might plead with reason for shorter hours of labor, for their task is never finished. Willing workers they may be, but never-ending workers they assuredly are, hands, feet, heart, mind, all incessantly toiling, suffering, working on behalf of the unheeding family. A delicate, fragile mother often bears, uncomplainingly, a load far heavier, often endures fatigue much more trying, because so much of it is mental, than that endured by the strong laboring men who agitate for shorter hours.

In letters to husband and sons, Mrs. Vernon never mentioned these dark shades in her life; the day's doings were ever freshly pictured, as they should be, not as they occasionally were. If ever those letters should be unearthed in the far future, they will convey a graphic picture of an ideal life, pure and bright as family history ever should be, breathing the writer's sweet unselfish spirit throughout, a spirit steeped in love and devotion for those both of whom and for whom she wrote.

"The mighty lord" of the province in Wattibuldi prized these weekly letters rightly. No existing romance ever engrossed him as they did. Regularly as the mail was due, vague fears oppressed him lest it should be fruitless for him, or bring bad news, and when at last the thin blue cover was torn open, and his eyes devoured its contents, all else, all his weighty matters of business, were forgotten, as if they were not, as his spirit leaped over the thousands of intervening miles, and communed with his wife. He read more than she wrote. The mere writing revealed what the words omitted. The unexpressed yearning, the unspoken anxiety, the responsibility which was sometimes too great for her, were all clear to him in a wavering bit of writing, a repeated erasure, or a badly constructed paragraph—he knew her so thoroughly that his return letter would meet the wants she had not named, and give the comfort and encouragement for which she had not known she had asked.

Will knew—indeed, many of his subordinates, native as well as European, knew—that on the mail day the commissioner was most accessible; his mood was softer and more considerate. Perhaps Will himself was more pliable and open to reason when he had read his own home letter, over which he had not so long ceased to shed boyish tears of home-sickness; but he generally chose these days to submit some new plan to his father—a plan which would of course entail a greater outlay than he had at command. On his twenty-first birthday, his father was out in camp, several marches out of *Wattibuldi*, and the young man had not only stood "Simp-

kin " to his mess, which was of course expected of him, but he had bestowed the same expensive wine on the sergeants' mess, for which there was no possible occasion, and had also given a good dinner, with Bass *ad lib.*, to that of his own troopers.

Mr. Vernon paid the heavy bill, but informed his son that, unless he chose to pay his own debts, he must at once apply for a less expensive regiment, a threat that greatly alarmed the young dragoon, who was beginning to look forward to a return with the regiment to England, where it was due cold season after next. Fluffy's ship would be relieved by that time, too, and "old George" would be about leaving Oxford. What rapturous possibilities opened before him at the thought of the reunion with his brothers, when he would no longer be the subject of their gibes and jests. He would have his long leave, with home for his headquarters, too. How delightful it would all be !

But with that cold season there came out to Wattibuldi the wife of his colonel, and his eldest daughter May, and in a very short time Will had plunged deeply into his second love affair, though he always declared it to be his first.

Annie Lightup had long since ceased to occupy his thoughts ; or, whenever he did think of her, it was with some degree of shame and disgust of his boyish folly. Yet May Leicester was but an educated edition of the sweetseller's daughter, a sham article still, but so veneered and trained that she appeared to mere acquaintances all that was sweet and sterling. She knew as well as if she had been told that she was brought out to make a good match ; though such a vulgar fact had never crossed her mother's lips. Mrs. Leicester was much too ladylike to acknowledge even to herself that her daughter was up for sale to the highest bidder.

Of course all the subs were head over ears in love after that first dance given by the dragoons in honor of their colonel's wife and daughter. May had danced with all the officers, from the major down to the last-joined sub, as was due to her hosts ; and her mother had said nothing when she gave Will a second and a third dance. At that time Mrs. Leicester was not aware of the five other sons of the commissioner, and she, like May, had been greatly interested in the young man's gallantry at the rajah's fort ; but as soon as she knew, she kept May in better order. Young Vernon was "a very dear boy," she continued to say ; "but May must not waste her time."

Henceforward, when the subs came to call, Mrs. Leicester received

them alone. Each gentleman whose card lacked those magic letters, "I. C. S.," only saw the *Burra Mem Sahib*, or great lady ; but when those much-infering initials appeared, the butler went without telling to May's ayah, to request the young lady's presence in the drawing room.

Yet there were plenty of opportunities of meeting elsewhere—in the early morning rides, at the afternoon band, at the weekly tennis parties, and at the constant quadrille parties—so-called because quadrilles never figured on the programme ; and May enjoyed frightening her watchful mother by flirting with ineligible, never thinking what a dangerous game she played. Young Osborne was very much smitten, too. While he and Will talked to each other confidentially of her rare and beautiful charms, each declared he had no chance against the other. Osborne's expectations were even less than Will's, with his five brothers as handicaps ; but they liked to exalt her as a sort of Madonna, with modest worship, worshipping the unattainable.

There was a staff officer in the station who had good private means, and was heir to a baronetcy, whom Mrs. Leicester much fancied. He was, in fact, the best catch in the station, and he knew it ; but he was also heir to something else, an hereditary taint in his blood. He knew this also, but others did not, and so far he had acted like an honorable, honest man, and refused all temptation to marry and hand on the terrible inheritance to unborn generations.

When May came out, fresh as her name, sweet and full of happiness, he was greatly attracted to her, and in him the subs saw their own chances disappear, while the silly girl, elated by his evident admiration and her mother's innuendoes, met his advances half-way, and thus herself helped to unfasten the fetters her pretty face and happy temper had bound round his heart.

By slow and hardly perceptible degrees he ceased his decided attentions, more, as it were, exchanging the would-be lover's rôle for that of an interested friend than giving up his attentions altogether, and in his honest heart he blamed himself for having gone so far. May herself never saw the change till her mother pointed it out. That old campaigner saw it quickly enough, but turned it to advantage in no time.

"Her darling was too young to think seriously of settling in life," she said, at the band-stand, just as the major had trotted past her carriage ; and her companions inferred, and spread the inference

that Major Grandon had actually proposed and been rejected with the full concurrence of her parents.

The report never came to his ears, so he did not suffer, and it told in the dear girl's favor. She was not mercenary—she was happy at home. Why should she settle till she had seen more of the world?

After hearing this Will's spirits rose again, and he began to consult with Osborne whether it was possible to get into the Staff Corps, and so work up to be in a better position to marry; for, so long as May was free, why shouldn't he win her at last?

His father saw it all, while he said nothing. Will little thought how often he figured in those letters home as the dying duck watching his innamorata from afar. He little thought how transparent were his little dodges to avert his father's suspicion, how easily understood were his hopes and fears, his moody hours when she had not smiled on him, his gayety when she had! The commissioner had gone through it all long ago, and he had only to look back into his memory and recognize the old, old signs that make and mar in never ceasing repetition.

"Not much in the colonel's daughter, is there?" he would ask, when he and his boy were by themselves. "Her looks are all she has in her favor—eh?"

At the unsuspected bait, Will never failed to rise, while the father, calmly smoking, appeared the very essence of indifference.

"Not much beside her loveliness, father! Why, all our chaps are gone on her, and so are the line fellows, I can tell you."

"Hem! She's not bad looking; but she seems silly, empty-headed, don't you think?"

Then Will waxed eloquent—told how he knew for a fact she had come out in an exam. at school nearly at the top; how her music master thought so highly of her playing that he wanted her to work for honors.

"To pocket an extra fee," said the father.

Will chafed at the interruption, and went on. "And she's a born actress," he added. "You must allow that much; you were at our theatricals."

"I was—worse luck. They seemed to me inferior to the soldiers', because there was so little to laugh at. The ladies were woodeny, I thought."

"*Woodeny!*" Will's disgust was at fever heat. "I know for a fact," he repeated, as if that sentence admitted of no possible doubt,

"she could make a fortune on the stage. Someone who saw her at her school's breaking-up charades, and who knows lots about acting, you know, and theatrical managers, and all that lot, said she really ought to take it up as a profession ; but then, you know, of course, with her father like this, it isn't necessary, you know."

"But she's one of a large family. He ought to be very thankful if one of them could keep herself."

"Oh, I say now ! What ! the colonel of *our* regiment let his daughter be an actress ? Well, I do think—ah, you are joking."

At this, or such another point as this, the commissioner's assumed indifference usually broke down, and the two would wake the echoes of the silent veranda in the quiet evening with peals of laughter.

Will never quite made his father out, though. He suspected something of what he said was meant, if not all ; and he would go off to his quarters shaking his head admiringly as he reflected on "the dear old man's wonderful wit and ability."

Will was working on in one direction with good effect. His aptitude for learning the language continued, and his interest in it, also. He was a good officer, too—did his work smartly and quickly, and continued to be a great favorite with his men. It was their hope some little war might arise before they were in orders for England, that they might have him to lead them forward. Sergeant Murphy had broken out into song in his praise, and there was no more welcome refrain sung at the sergeants' mess than that which ended every verse of Murphy's doggerel relation of the gun capture.

" With his feet so light, and his oi so bright,
Than all spalpeens, Vernon is moy delight."

With Mrs. Leicester, the commissioner enjoyed a little badinage on the same subject.

"How I envy you your girls !" he said. "Here am I, with six fellows to bring up, who'll walk off to all the quarters of the globe as soon as they have got all they can out of me, and I may never see one of them again ; whereas, if I had a daughter, she would be with me to the last."

"Unless she married," Mrs. Leicester exclaimed.

"Oh, I would take care of that. I wouldn't be so kind as you are. How you must tremble lest Miss May should fancy one of *these dangles*, and leave you !"

"I left *my* father, dear Mr. Vernon ; and your wife left hers ; but, as you say, I *do* tremble sometimes."

"Especially if the suitor be ineligible," he added.

She glanced at him, but the calm, kindly expression disarmed suspicion.

"Ah, indeed," she replied, lowering her voice a little, "then one does indeed tremble. Dear Mr. Vernon, can you tell me if young Lee, on your staff, is a favorite of yours? Of course I like to be civil to everyone ; but now dear May is with us, I have to be very careful whom I ask to the house. I suppose I need not be suspicious of him?"

"Lee is a famous good fellow—a favorite of Fortune's, as well as mine. I have the greatest respect for him."

"Ah, but when people say they have the greatest respect, I generally find there is something wanting ; it infers social inferiority sometimes. Now, who *is* Mr. Lee?"

"He's getting sixteen hundred rupees a month," was the guarded answer. "He's a rising man. I wish my boy had such prospects."

Mr. Vernon well knew who young Lee was—the son of a small grocer in a small English inland town, who solely through his own ability had raised himself far above his original station ; but the commissioner had no intention of telling this to go the round of the gupmongers of the station. Some small gaucherie of manner had aroused one or two to question Mr. Lee's antecedents ; but, by Mr. Vernon, no one was likely to have mere impertinent curiosity satisfied, and he gravely replied :

"I should have thought 'respect' was a very high eulogium ; at any rate, it presupposes the qualities most to be desired."

"There is Lord Herbert of Lee," she continued irrelevantly. "Lee is a good name, you see ; but I never heard this young Lee speak of his people."

"No, he's an unassuming, modest young fellow."

She did not see the twinkle in his eyes, and so went on with the subject, believing she had a sympathetic listener.

"May says he can't dance—as if one could dance through life ! But she's very kind ; she just gave him one turn and then pretended she would like to sit out the remainder. So nice of her, wasn't it ? But she found him very intelligent."

"Really !"

"I am always so sorry for young men out here—freed from home

restraint and home comfort. I never mind how many come in to tea on Sunday afternoons ; but, of course, I don't admit *any* one. Though, now that you speak so highly of Mr. Lee, I shall certainly allow him to come also."

"No, no ; I don't stand godfather. I merely say what I know of him officially."

"Oh, you naughty man ! So dreadfully prudent !"

And then she would give the signal for the ladies to leave the dinner table, and, as first lady in the station, would do the honors of the commissioner's beautiful drawing room in "poor dear Mrs. Vernon's place." Nothing pleased her more than a state dinner, when she firmly believed her presence was as necessary as the commissioner's.

It had been a joke among the Vernon boys that the mother's father was a shepherd, and Will had somehow tried the same wit on his chum Osborne ; so it had reached—who can tell how ?—Mrs. Leicester's ears. After the last confidential talk with her host, she felt she could say almost anything to him ; and when the gentlemen joined the ladies, she determined to ask him if the report was true. And in her sweetest accents she boldly put the question.

Mr. Vernon was quite astounded at her impertinence. For a moment there came a very alarming expression into the usually calm eyes, as he turned them swiftly upon her. But then he remembered the stupid old joke, and his anger gave place to un-mixed amusement.

"Yes," he said, very slowly and clearly, drawing himself to his full height as he looked down upon her, "it is quite true my father-in-law was a sort of shepherd."

"No, indeed ! Well, I'm sure you'll not mind my asking you. I've no doubt he was a very superior man. There was that delightful shepherd of Salisbury Plain, you know ; and things are so different nowadays. Everybody gets educated, and then there's no difference, is there ? Look at your dear heroic boy, for instance ! But I believe you've very blue blood on your side."

"My boys take after their mother most."

"Really ! You must have great confidence in her. She has sole charge of all the rest, hasn't she ?"

"Oh, yes. In fact, she's rather a blue stocking—quite capable of helping them with Latin and French and German. I have an idea she's a good mathematician, too."

"They say it's an education for a girl to have a clever husband. She must be naturally apt."

"Have you seen her likeness?" he asked. He felt he could not continue this talk much longer without laughing. "If you'll wait a moment, I'll show you our wedding group. Horridly old-fashioned though, now."

He opened a cabinet and brought out an elaborate case of carved ivory which she immensely admired.

"It's not Indian?" she said.

"Oh, no, it was a wedding present from my wife's uncle. He sent to China for it."

Then he searched in his pocket for the key, while she waited, wondering if the poor relations of the bride would be portrayed in hobnails and corduroys, while two or three of the other guests came up to admire the case.

"I wonder he likes to show the thing," thought Mrs. Leicester, as her host smilingly bade them make allowances for old fashions; but she said aloud:

"Such an interesting souvenir. Were you married in India?"

"Oh, no," he said. "We were married at Winchester. The dean was my wife's godfather, and so insisted on having the ceremony in his cathedral. It was a great honor, wasn't it? My father-in-law had been a Winchester boy, so there was a slight connecting link with the place, too."

Mrs. Leicester glanced at her host, and wondered his smooth fiction didn't choke him. She felt severely that he was falsifying his statements, and had no doubt in her own mind that Mrs. Vernon's father had been the dean's cowboy, and Mrs. Vernon herself one of his servants.

But the picture was before her—an exquisite painting representing the grand old Norman porch of the deanery for background; a background which threw out with beautiful grace and power the wedding-group, consisting of the newly married couple, their two fathers and one mother, the dean and his wife, and a bevy of white-robed bridesmaids merely indicated.

Everyone had now drawn close to the commissioner, and the picture was passed from hand to hand, eliciting more or less admiration, according to the knowledge or taste of the beholder.

Of course Mrs. Leicester had the first view, and it was to her her host introduced the painted figures.

"My wife, of course," he said. "The painting is the work of

a woman, therefore the dress is elaborately studied. The satin reveals itself, doesn't it? and I am told the lace can be known, too. She is rather proud of that lace veil; it was given as a flounce to one of her mother's ancestors by poor Katharine of Aragon. Old Mrs. Lavender had it made into a veil."

"And her father?" she asked. "I don't see him."

"No?" he said; "there he is, close to her."

"A clergyman?" she said faintly.

"Yes, Dr. Lavender, Tutor and Fellow of Trinity, lately Rector of Riverham in Hampshire, and a faithful *shepherd* of his flock."

She heard no more further remarks on the then dean, or on his own father—interesting allusions to old customs and old places in Winchester were all unheard by her, or heard only as through the wall, yet she managed to appear outwardly pleased and interested, and no one ever knew how poignant was her humiliation. But the lesson did her good; after it, she took it into her head to set no bounds to the greatness of the Vernon family, and in consequence Will was taken into such favor as a possible husband, when his position was secure, for a younger daughter, that the poor boy's hopes rose, and he believed May might be his eventually.

Mr. Vernon was quite satisfied with himself. It is not given to everyone to pay back gross impertinence in a gentlemanly manner, and yet thoroughly, and Mrs. Leicester's punishment was thorough. She never presumed to be confidential with him again.

Again, at the end of the second year, it was found inexpedient for him to go home, and again his wife acquiesced bravely and cheerfully. Time was making her more tolerant of the separation, she said. Had she not Isoline's patient hope as a pattern?

"They say eels get used to skinning," said Great-aunt Jane; "but I'll be bound they writhe a good deal over the process. But I dare say Miss Amy is very comfortable with no one to find fault with her likes and dislikes. She must keep up her figure, and be careful about her food, and he may not see much difference when he does come back. He was always a good man, or I should begin to think there was some great attraction at that place in India with the silly name."

When Fabian came home during the second year of his father's absence, there was great rejoicing. He had grown into a powerful man—forced forward, as it were, by his travels. He arrived one morning without announcing his intention, and met his grandmother marketing in the High Street. He had chosen to walk,

but he was followed by two cabs filled inside and outside with outlandish packages. A small tree of plantains ; a box of light wood bursting with oranges ; a parrot in a small cage, slanging the world in general at every jolt of the cab ; a marmoset in a barred box ; a wild cat, swearing and spitting through the bars of his iron prison ; a huge bundle of monkey-skins ; a bag of cocoa-nuts ; bundles of silk embroideries ; bamboo sticks by the dozen, his big sea-chest, and a few other chests—bearing strange characters and pictured advertisements—bought second-hand, to hold his overflowing possessions at the last moment. The quiet townspeople did not recognize the tall, rolling stranger as he passed along, but most people turned to look after his belongings. He knew his grandmother, as a matter of course, but she would have passed him by.

“Granny !” he cried in his man’s voice, and as she, startled, raised her head to look at the beaming face so high above her, he kissed her, unmindful of the public onlookers ; and turning her round to accompany him, bore her triumphantly onward to swell his little procession.

The boys were coming out of school, and a rush of them met them at the corner where four roads meet, Dalrymple among them.

“I say, here’s a lark !” cried one. “A sailor fellow with a caravan of curiosities !” And then, Mrs. Vernon was recognized, and the recognition extended, Fabian was instantly mobbed, and the cavalcade brought to a standstill.

As the returned boy stood among his old companions, all talking, admiring, questioning, he would needs have them to inspect his treasures, and but for his grandmother’s objections to obstructing the king’s highway, he would then and there have opened his bundles and shown off his pets.

“Oh, yes,” he cried ; “I must remember I’m back in civilized parts. You’ll be tired, too, dear old granny. Here, Dal, open the cab door, and we’ll put her in. You won’t mind having the marmoset on your knee, granny : it’s shivering, poor thing, and I’m sure it won’t bite you.” Then they moved on from the clustering, chattering throng of schoolfellows, to take the mother by surprise.

“And oh, my dearest boy !” his mother exclaimed, “where *are* we to put all these things ? And the little boys will be bitten to death by those wild creatures.”

“*I thought you would like them,*” he said, in sudden disappointment.

How well she read his feelings, and hastened to comfort him !

"My darling Fluffy, I shan't like anything that takes your attention from me ; and those beautiful creatures need so much care, they will take up all your time. I shall love them by and by, and value them immensely ; but I want you all to myself now."

The gilded armor was given a place of honor in the drawing room, and the hall, which was fortunately roomy, was so bedecked with the contents of the numerous bundles and bags as to resemble a very respectable museum. The tea house accommodated other treasures, and the live stock were kept warm in the stable—the coachman being fortunately a great lover of natural history. The parrot was presented to Great-aunt Jane, who interpreted its Chinese oaths into pleasing personal compliments, and grew lively with its companionship.

Fabian's happy presence gladdened his mother greatly. He was at home that second Christmas, and helped her to pass it cheerfully. The Marleon girls had returned, their father having got rid of his house, and started on the tour planned by his wife. On his return Urania was to be his housekeeper, and she began at once to follow Mrs. Vernon about in her daily domestic duties, so as to be able to fill the future position properly.

George bought a book for her as a Christmas-box. "She Couldn't Boil a Potato," was its title. It was the most appropriate subject he could think of, he told her, and by way of making it still more appropriate he had written her name and added a little couplet as a quotation. Fortunately she did not ask him to name the author ; indeed, she hardly understood it bore two meanings.

"Bend your high aims to lowly deeds,
And blossoms rise where erst were weeds."

Fabian took all three girls under the mistletoe without a moment's hesitation ; but George made no attempt to follow his example. He saw no happiness in grabbing a struggling, laughing girl, and succeeding in only touching her ear or her hair, besides receiving a sounding smack on his cheek for his pains. The idea of kissing Urania thus was repugnant ; indeed, he thrilled all over at the mere thought of kissing her, and put it from him as an impertinence to her modesty.

"You are such a solemn old grampus," his brother told him, "or else there's someone at Oxford. I only hope it's not another Annie"

Lightup. Bill was well out of that. Such a pert little stuck-up creature she is. Why, she's not fit to be named on the same day as the Japanese tea girls! They are pretty and jolly, too."

But Fabian and Dalrymple together were rather too much of a good thing. Their appetites were never appeased; the cook groaned over their incessant meals; their mother was seriously afraid they were utterly ruining their digestive organs; they needed a man's hand over them to restrain their heedless, restless ways, and George dare not attempt to use his authority, for they laughed him to scorn. To their mother, however, and in her presence, they were always loving and respectful, and when the servants brought complaints of riotous proceedings, raids on the larder, carpets coated with mud, best crockery used for the animals, trampled flower-beds, and making Master Harold and Master Arthur "uprageous," she hardly believed the reports. But when one late afternoon, when her little boys were playing on the hearthrug together, the firelight flooding the pretty drawing room, and their mother restfully watching their antics while her thoughts were far away, Harold swore at his little brother, using an oath which made her ears tingle and her eyes flash, she was keenly awakened to what was really going on.

"Harold!" she cried in a tone which made the boy jump to his feet, "where did you learn that wicked word, sir?"

"I didn't mean it," he exclaimed. "Fabian says it, and Dimple says it; but I'll never say it again."

At that moment the front door was assailed by Fluffy's well-known vigorous knock, and as his mother heard his voice as he and Dalrymple entered, she ran out into the hall, and bade them follow her into the drawing room. She shut the door upon them as they went in, and full of her horror and disappointment, she faced them.

"Here is your little brother," she cried, "using the holiest name as if it were the lowest, and he learned it from his elder brothers, who should be his examples—his best friends. My boys, my dear boys, am I to be afraid to let these innocent babies be with you? Am I to fear they will be contaminated by you, who were innocent babies too, so short a time ago? Is it possible I am to be ashamed and degraded when till now I was so proud?"

There were no tears in her eyes, but her voice was full of *passionate sorrow as she stood holding on to the back of a chair, her face working with her deep emotion.*

Fabian reddened up to the roots of his curly flaxen hair, his impulsive disposition at once convicted himself.

"Mamma!" he cried, going back to the almost dropped name, "don't say that." And then he burst into tears—the tears of a child who dare not defend himself because he feels his guilt; while Dalrymple, who, of a stronger nature, felt his fault differently, said:

"Most fellows swear without thinking. You know we would not teach them anything bad willingly. Mother, you are very hard on us."

"Hard on you!" she exclaimed, addressing him scornfully. "Can anything be too hard to say to a boy who leads another the first step downward? Your father never uses bad language, never sullies his lips with impious words, and what is your excuse but condemnation, for it surely infers oaths are so common to you you don't know when you use them. Will you like to be the first to destroy in your little brothers the awe and reverence they owe to God?"

Dalrymple stood silent, his head bent, his hands clasped before him. Neither boy had ever seen her so indignant, so merciless. For a moment her mother's heart failed her. Was she to acknowledge the boys, who had been her babies so short a time since, had already passed out of her authority? Were their hearts still waxen? or had contact with the world hardened them to resist her old-fashioned interference? Fabian's tears were over; his manhood asserted itself. He crossed over to his mother, and held out his hand.

"Mamma!" he cried, "will you believe me if I tell you I will try to stop it? Will you forgive me if I say I am sorry, I am ashamed?"

Then Dalrymple raised himself; he said not a word, but he drew near her, and put out his hand as if he would endorse his brother's words.

In the years to come, when the mother was but a memory, the brothers once reminded each other of this little scene.

"I am glad the kids told of us," said one. "It was the best thing that could have happened. We were going all wrong, old fellow, and she trusted us so thoroughly."

"I never find a bad word tempting me," was the rejoinder, "but she seems to start up before me and forbid it."

The harmony was very great for the rest of the holidays. There were no more complaints from the servants, and even when the

wild cat made good its escape, Fluffy controlled himself. He was again posted to a ship in February; and when he went away, Cotley lamented the loss of his gay, boyish face, his genial greeting and eccentric movements.

In June Dimple passed into Sandhurst, and, after he had gone, only the two youngest remained in the home. Harold attained to the dignity of a Grammar-school boy at the Easter term, and his mother brushed up her Latin and arithmetic, and worked with him in the evenings, that he should keep up the credit of the name his father and brothers had made famous. Nothing tempted her away from home when her little boy's lessons were going on. His success was hers. He was not so quick as his brothers, and sometimes she was tempted to suggest to his master that his powers were overtaxed; but as Florence Dombey had overcome the difficulties little Paul found in Miss Blimber's lessons, by mastering them first herself and learning to simplify them to him, so Mrs. Vernon toiled in her solitary evenings to keep ahead of her boy and clear the way for him. How proudly she sent his first school report out to his father. He not only stood well in his form, it stated, but his work was declared to be "conscientious," and though Harold could not understand what that meant, his father could, and his mother felt more than rewarded for her labor.

CHAPTER XV

"KISMET"

GEORGE had been half his time at college before he had convinced himself that his future work must lie, not, as his father was constantly recommending, in the Indian Civil Service, but in the ranks of the Church.

His decision was a grievous disappointment to the man who firmly believed his own work was pre-eminent. "The Church wants a soft heart more than a hard head," he used to say. "I don't like to think my name is to die out here;" but he soon comforted himself with the reflection that one of the younger boys might follow his footsteps, and so he gave an unqualified consent. *As for the mother*, she was sincerely pleased that her clever boy *should follow in his grandfather's footsteps.*

"You don't know what flattering opinions I heard of George at Oxford," she wrote out to India. "He is really considered one of the coming lights. He is sure to be made a Fellow, and either get a good college living or some good position in college; but he doesn't talk about himself. I hope and think he is swayed by really conscientious conviction."

Indeed, George had merely said, "He wished to be a parson." He added nothing concerning the uneasiness and vague doubts which, spite of his happy nature, had been working in his mind for so long—which were still working.

When he made his choice, he at first felt all the exaltation of a mind at ease with itself. He had chosen the good part; the uncertainty was ended; he was "marked out for the ministry." But very soon he recognized the fact that life has no full stops; his decision was merely giving a name to what had been long intended, and it bound him to go on, not on the level road, but from height to height, the good of to-day pointing to the better for to-morrow. The pride of university distinctions, the keen striving for intellectual advantages, which had at first sufficed to make his college life one of pleasurable excitement, soon lost their glamour. The hard thought which exhausted so many men was to him but proper constitutional exercise; his natural thoroughness, his good memory, and his orderly mind made work easy to him, and did not suffice, therefore, to fill his entire being; he was always hungering after something else unattainable; the work before and around him satisfied his mental strength as it were in part only; the giants to hand were too easily vanquished; greater giants were needed to keep his arm in practice.

He thought he had found giants enough when he contemplated the work of the Church, and was surprised, as he threw himself into the necessary preparation, that absolute peace still eluded him. Without knowing it, he was putting intellectuality first and foremost, using his brains to display his ability, going ahead from sheer determination to surpass, and though he was modest in his success, yet in his heart of hearts he rejoiced in his ability not as God-given, but as the result of his own might.

He was the most famous man of his year, when he was but just over twenty-one. The plaudits of the crowd, the complimentary words, the admiring looks, were all as sweet as honey to him.

"*What a future lies before him!*" said the learned doctor, with

degrees of every university in Christendom, to his happy mother, who, of course, was present to witness his further triumph. "I foresee a very brilliant career for him."

Everyone saw a brilliant future opening before him. Mrs. Lansing regretted her dear dead boy had not lived to be at college with him. She saw his possible triumphs, too, and in the young men who crowded the gardens and streets she saw him also moving hither and thither as his father had moved before him. For their dear sakes, she looked kindly on these eager, pushing youths. Her loss had widened, not narrowed, her sympathy; she could rejoice with other mothers and wives, though she was a widow and childless.

George joined some friends, and went off to Italy for part of the Long Vacation.

"He needs thorough change and relaxation," Mrs. Vernon wrote to her husband. "And the expense won't fall on you, sir; 'for though on pleasure I am bent, I have a frugal mind,' and don't spend all my allowance; so my savings will 'pay for his tour comfortably.'"

George never knew how his enjoyment was purchased by her self-denial, nor did her husband know, till he was at home again, that the carriage had long been given up. "Walking was best for her," she had told her relations, when they wondered at the "unnecessary economy." But hers was that happy nature which takes its pleasure in putting the welfare of others before its own, and be sure it brought its own reward.

When he returned, a new creation had been revealed to his untravelled mind: things hitherto unconsidered, or else considered so lightly as to dwindle out of their right proportions. Names, which had always been familiar as names, had become actualities since he had walked among the scenes in which their owners had walked; seen with his eyes the hills, nay, the very buildings, famed in classic story. Clearly now he realized that these heroes of the class-books had been living beings, and though the exaggeration of time had built around them and their deeds till they had carried them almost out of the possible, yet enough remains even to the sceptical modern enquirer, to convince one that noble acts and heroic lives have really existed. Men who could raise such mighty buildings, and could build up such mighty states, must

have possessed great souls and aspirations ; and as he passed from studying the old Roman and Greek Titans, and went on to gaze at the great pictures of the Middle Ages, a wholesome sense of his own littleness had possessed him. He came home with ideas uprooted, which had seemed so fixed ; with "old things become new," and new things suffering by comparison with the old. Everything desirable, everything laudable, had until this been centred in "Alma Mater"; but the new thoughts born of the old, old times were making havoc of those formerly unanswerable arguments in favor of the culture of modern academical studies. A chaotic sense of ruin and riches whirled in his mind ; a mental picture of old Rome and Athens. He said nothing of this under seething ; he only described the beautiful things visible to every looker-on, and no one dreamed how, beside this enthusiastic appreciation and graphic description, ran the almost stupefying sense of disappointment and dismay.

Of course such a state of mind could not continue long ; but it was an apparent accident that cleared the doubts, and brought order out of chaos.

He went with his mother to spend a day in her former home at the little town of Riverham. She generally made an annual pious pilgrimage to her father's and mother's grave ; going alone because the journey was tedious, not on account of distance, but because of many changes from one line to another. But this year George had volunteered to accompany her, as the days were shortening, and he thought the return would be lightened to her by his company. It was years, too, since he had been there, and now that he intended taking Holy Orders, he took deeper interest in his grandfather's work. So together the mother and son reached the buried-alive little town—almost the only town left in the South of England which the railway had not yet linked to civilization—driving the last two miles in the springless cart politely called the omnibus. The beautiful church stands just outside the four streets, which, running toward the four points of the compass, are with propriety named North, South, East, and West streets. A large stone pump—the handle whereof never ceases to squeak, as if in protest against its constant use, is the only public ornament that adorns the market-cross in the centre of the town ; the few shops are unobtrusive, like their wares ; open gutters run beside the pavements ; a passing carriage brings many faces to the small-paned windows. The joys and sorrows of the one family are the

joys and sorrows of the whole community. Yet there are excitements even here ; Bible Christians and Church-people, Wesleyans and Swedenborgians have their mutual scorns, their favored ministers, their black sheep. There is a smoking hall over which the various denominations quarrel ; the pipe of peace is a misnomer, for the pipe of the one body of Christians would poison the pipe of the others. But to an outsider, ignorant of the domestic wars and tumults, the dulness of the empty streets strikes with an unbearable chill. He calls Riverham "mouldy," stagnant, blighted. And as he quickly turns his back on its dwarfed houses, its streets—through which cows saunter at their own sweet will—and its old-world lack of energy, he wonders how lives are lived there, and yawns at the mere idea of *his* lot being cast therein. George saw no beauty in the little town ; he wondered to see his mother's eyes and cheeks brighten as she recognized familiar names and faces. Her girlhood seemed to return to her as she stepped lightly over the cobbles which formed the greater part of the sidewalks, and which found out the tenderest parts of her son's unaccustomed feet. She talked gayly as they went along, calling his attention here and there, and giving little histories of old inhabitants. The pain of returning to her old home without seeing the forms which made it homelike had long passed away. It was only pleasure now to her to gaze on the scenes which had surrounded her from babyhood, and to hear the dialect in which her nurse had talked to her ; but when at length they turned out of the street, crossed a wide square surrounded by cottages and malt-houses, termed, from some bygone use, the Salt-market, and came in front of the massive church tower, with the old red-tiled rectory nestling under the south wall, his full interest was aroused. These two buildings, set end-ways to the town, shut in all further approach, and, with the boundary wall of the graveyard, formed a barrier between the straggling street and the open country. For over eight hundred years they had so stood, though a change had come over the rectory. Originally a priory for so many monks, it was now merely a rambling dwelling house, shut away in sweet, flowery seclusion ; its smooth lawn bordered by the river on the south side, and the low meadows coming up round the east. The old prior's herb garden still attracted the bees from far and wide to the descendants of those *old herbs* which had for centuries formed alike the relish of the community's midday soup, whether savory or maigre ; and the

pharmacopœia of the brother who attended to his companions' bodily ailments.

Mrs. Vernon drew her son back as he would have entered the great porch under the west tower, and stood looking at that other and smaller porch which gave entrance into the little paved square of the dwelling house.

"It is so odd not to be able to go straight in there," she said, speaking softly as if afraid of disturbing the quiet dead. "I always picture my father standing in that archway, as I saw him last, with Skye, his dog, at his feet. The jasmine was in flower as it is now, and there was a long branch flapping against his head just as it flaps idly about now. I love that jasmine, it grows all over that wall far back; my wedding bouquet was cut from it. I would not have any other flowers, I remember. If I die in the summer anywhere in England, I should like some of it to be put on my coffin."

"Now you are getting sentimental, mother. Come on into the church, unless you are going to call here."

"No, no; I went in once, and it took me long to replace the old furniture as I remembered it. I don't want to remember it as it is, but as it was. We can see enough of the garden over the hedge from the other end. Let us go into the church while we are alone."

A large old church, with the largest east window in the county. The chancel would have held the usual congregation, which was scattered drearily over the four large aisles and the three lumbering galleries; but in those days, pews belonged to the houses, and to attempt to tamper with tenants' rights, whether those rights were used or not, would have been dangerous. Mrs. Vernon walked straight up the echoing middle aisle to the rectory pew, and knelt for a few seconds in silent prayer.

"I remember," she whispered presently, "when I could not see over this book-board, and when clambering on the hassock was really a feat to accomplish. It seems so short a time since, and yet——"

Then she took George into a little side chapel, partly filled up as a vestry, and showed him the painted window to her father's memory; and the old stone coffins, one of which had once held a murdered king. A little chamber had lately been discovered in the thickness of the wall; perhaps it had been a confessional. *There was the Leper's Squint, too, for the contaminated creatures*

to get a sight of the host without infecting the other worshippers ; but the new organ appealed to George's imagination more than all these tokens of a long-past time. It was the recent gift of a parishioner, in memory of a relation who was himself a devoted musician, and George's fingers itched to make it peal through the building. His mother argued that everyone was feeding ; that, if she shut the door, no one would suppose any but the orthodox organist was at work—that its sound would not alarm the rectory people, who were probably feeding, too, at the further side of the house ; and he, nothing loath, accepted her services as blower, and set to work.

"Why, George," she exclaimed, as he at last stopped the reverberating sounds which had filled the empty building with a host of harmonious utterances, "how you have improved ! If I could play as well, I would be an organist."

His face was full of excitement. The grand chords, the pleading minors, the softly flowing repetitions had lifted him out of the prosaic world, and beautified his boyish countenance. He closed the keyboard and got off the stool.

"I hope I shan't be tempted by and by," he said excitedly, "to think more of the music than of the essentials. But it must be delightful to serve in a church like this, with *such* an organ !"

"Well, dear, why shouldn't you get such another ? England is full of such ; and few people are content with excruciating—*music*—as it is called, nowadays."

He looked at her smiling.

"You would like to see me in there ?" he said, nodding toward the pulpit. "Well, stranger things might happen."

They passed gayly out of the cool, dark buildings into the brilliant sunshine. Not a creature was about. It was feeding-time, as she had assured him, and everyone was at dinner.

Mrs. Vernon had promised to dine early with her cousins, Mr. and Miss Lee, but George had rebelled against accompanying her. A hot early dinner with Miss Lee, he had declared, would kill him. And when he had taken his mother within sight of the trim house with the brass-plated door and the post and rails to mark its aristocratic separation from the street, he came back to the church and passed on through the old part of the churchyard, thick with lichen-covered stones and grassy hillocks, to the new part, taken from the level water meadows beyond, and dignified with the name of cemetery. Some old trees had been left in the midst of

the neat newness of this as yet sparsely occupied ground, and seats were placed round them. The gray east end of the church and the old barnlike end of the old priory screened it at the one side, and beyond it the green fields stretched to the winding river. Over the river the country, studded with farmsteads, reached away to a low range of hills, partly wooded, one of which rose like a miniature Chimborazo, with a great beacon on its summit, formerly a blazing signal, to both land and sea ; for the low hills bordered the channel waves, and on stormy nights its swell mingled with the wind and rain, and spoke to inland Riverham of loss and danger.

A sweet, quiet, arcadian scene to George this summer afternoon, as he leant over the gate and gazed around him. Thoughts of his mother's childhood came uppermost as he looked through the bushes into the rectory garden. Something of the tranquil, cheerful scene must have moulded her disposition. The calm, the sweetness, the wholesomeness of the picture all seemed to have helped to form her character. Her freedom from narrowness, her wide sympathy, her happy temper and healthy habits must have been begotten by these surroundings, these healthful, suggestive scenes. Then, too, he tried to realize his grandfather living and working in this remote place and being content. "Content!" he repeated, raising his straw hat to let the soft air meet his forehead. "I wonder if he really felt content. I should die of ennui!"

He sighed as he watched the water flowing and turning. Such a different river to that familiar Cotley river, kept in decorous bounds with its wide embankments and its rows of pillared elms. There were sedges in plenty here, where the reed warblers lived their innocent lives, giving vocal praise incessantly through the summer evenings ; but only a few stunted willows, which grew obliquely owing to the prevailing wind that kept them one-sided ; and on either hand the dyked meadows stretched, pasturing the milky mothers from the neighboring farms. In mid-distance the green turf was picturesquely contrasted by a low red cliff, sheltering a sandstone house, from whence a sandy road led sharply upward. Onward, again, lay a large estuary, into which, in bygone centuries, the Danes had found their way, and, penetrating up the river, had brought their ships into the very heart of Riverham, too often to the utter ruin and desolation of its inhabitants. But it was impossible now to imagine raid and rapine triumphant in these *peaceful scenes*. Wild birds had the solitary river bends to

themselves, and only the occasional shot of the sportsman disturbed them. Cuypp has painted just such level pastures, just such well-fed cattle—the very harmony of still life. And as George, his ears yet ringing with the thrilling organ notes, stood a solitary onlooker, the soundless harmony of nature continued the strain.

He presently passed through the little gate and read the few epitaphs ; his grandfather's being the most ostentatious of the monuments. "His afflicted and grateful parishioners" had raised it in a style as questionable as their grammar. But his grandson did not criticise either ; he noted the names and ages. His grandmother, aged twenty-three—it seemed a ridiculous age, he thought, for a grandmother !—her husband, aged sixty-eight. How would the girl wife recognize the elderly husband ; or will the light of eternity transform each to a glorified semblance, free from earth's traces of toil and sorrow, free from time's marks, yet easily identified again ? After the rector's name were the initials of college distinctions he had gained, proving him to have been in his day one of the foremost scholars of his university. His grandson's thoughts went back to that busy, ambitious life at college, ending here by the quiet river ; his very name buried with him, though he had taken such infinite pains to make it famous. George seated himself under a large yew tree, leaning his elbows on his knees and his head upon his hands, while he mused upon the uncertainty of everything but that which the wise man says "cometh to all—death" ; and the buzzing of numberless cockchafer's in the branches above him, the soft laving of the river amid the reeds, the distant mellow whistle of the blackbird, and the noonday heat, all combined to send him into a dreamless, restful sleep.

A step on the gravel roused him presently. It was a painter passing to an unfinished gravestone. He took no notice of George. He had a certain number of letters to paint in by a given time ; why should he waste his thoughts on a stranger ? And yet, all unconsciously, he held George's destiny in his paint-box.

The young man started up, and looked at his watch. He had slept for over half an hour ; the shadows had crept round over the eastern window ; it was almost time for his mother's return. The surroundings, but for the painter at the far corner, were as solitary as before ; the Riverhamites were evidently slow to digest their midday meal. He bethought himself of his notebook, and took it out, and made a little sketch of the church, with the rectory roofs *and gables beside it*. It by no means satisfied him. What were

the buildings without their setting, the distant hills, the heath with its sandy roads, its burrows and fir clumps, the level meadows, the sedge-fringed river, the distant glitter of the estuary, the farmstead under the red cliff, and the sweet fresh air stirred by the melody of birds, the hum of insects, and the rustling of leaves?

He tore the page out and up into a thousand bits. "A little sermon for me," he murmured, smiling at the conceit—"the incompleteness and unsatisfactoriness of the things of time." And so he stood up and noted the scene afresh, to store it in the completeness of the divine painting in his "mind's eye," to be recalled vividly again and again in years to come. The painter began a low whistle over his work; it was evidently making satisfactory progress.

George had seen the epitaph was all sketched in as he had passed by on his first walking round; only the text had been unfinished. It was an ordinary upright stone. John Wright and his wife, Jane Wright, and three or four infants, lay beneath it. "Of this parish," was all it told of their lives. Their joys and sorrows were probably remembered by a dozen interested relations and friends; in as many years they would be but as dim memories. So it must be with the majority. As blades of grass, or as grains of sand, our lives pass without apparent necessity or importance, yet surely necessary, important, and useful as parts of a complete whole.

George sauntered over the short soft turf. "Good-day," he said, as he stopped by the man, and watched his pliant fingers quickly shape the letters.

"Day," was the curt reply, as he stopped his whistling, to resume it again as soon as he had jerked out the one word.

The text was almost written. Something knocked at George's heart as he read it—"The Master has come, and calleth——" He turned away, and lengthened his return by the gravel path, instead of crossing the grass; but he had no sooner got back to the seat than he retraced his steps.

"How odd!" he said to himself. "Dear old Doughty's text again."

The "for thee" was added as he again stood at the painter's side; and the man deigned to be communicative as he viewed his work at its conclusion.

"They would have 'THEE' in capitals," he exclaimed. "His old father pays for it; 'taint no concern o' mine, be sure. If they must have capitals, why, they must pay for 'em. I think 'tis waste,

myself ; but, there, 'tis their lookout. 'Tis somewhere in the Scripintures ; but we haven't found out where yet. Old Wright, he's going to ask the rector."

It was George's turn to be taciturn now. He did not volunteer the chapter and verse. "'Taint no concern o' mine," he repeated to himself as he turned away ; and he said it almost defiantly ; for though his eyes rested on the sunlit view bounded by the everlasting hills, there floated everywhere before all else the "THEE" pointing direct at himself.

"A heavenly telegram," he whispered, after a time spent in vain endeavors to shut it out from his mental vision. "It must be true, and no cant, that men have felt 'a call,' and known the very day and hour. I'll never laugh at such things again." But he shook himself as if he himself would be free, though in others he would admit the reasonableness of what he had hitherto dubbed "cant."

Ever since Mr. Doughty's sermon, the text had remained with him, and there was no doubt it had governed his ultimate choice of a profession ; but till now it had done no more. He had entered upon the necessary theological studies without enthusiasm or spiritual zeal ; he had not even felt sure he could deny himself the purely worldly amusements and tastes which are inconsistent with purely spiritual work. He hoped that when the time came for ordination, the requisite feeling would come, too. Till then he would lead as blameless a life as he could. Disquieting thoughts, of course, would try him ; but if he did the best he could, why, no fellow could do more. So he had reasoned, when conscience had been loud ; and again and again conscience *had* been loud, and for a time holy aspirations had triumphed, but only for a time, fluctuating with his moods and the excitements of college life. Would this mood pass away, too—this message admitting of no uncertainty ? The Master had come, and called for him—called clearly and imperatively, not for him to attend at some future period, probably a distant period, but then—at that moment, now, as he stood looking at his Master's beautiful creation ; now, as he was in his best years of strength and energy and fresh powers of untiring youth.

"*Kismet*," he said ; but he knew it was something more—it was the voice of his God.

He turned and walked rapidly to and fro ; away at the end of the cemetery furthest from the newly painted stone, hoping the quick *pacing* would restore his usual calm ; but the patient hand was not

to tire—the tender shepherd could wait—the weeds and briar over the young heart were yet pliant and easily torn away, and at last he acknowledged it was hard to kick against the pricks.

"The Master has come, and called for *me*!" he said. Then for a few moments a glad rapture possessed him—that glad unspeakable bliss which is independent of earthly conditions—vouchsafed rarely, and for so short a period; but which floods the soul with radiant happiness, and renders subsequent sorrows and trials powerless.

"The joy which the world can neither give nor take away."

His mother's voice broke upon his reverie.

"My dear boy!" she cried, coming lightly across the grass toward him. "You must be tired of your own company; but Cousin Anna Lee wanted to come, and I had to wait till she was at liberty. Cousin Anna, here he is. Do say he's his father's image."

Miss Lee came mincingly forward—a maiden lady of sixty—shaking her curls, which hung down on either cheek in the fashion of her youth, and, raising her forefinger, cried, "You naughty young man not to come to luncheon—why was it? Now confess—was it you feared there would be no bottled ale? I know what 'Varsity men are—my brother was one. Dear me, it seems only the other day I was up for Commem., and was asked to breakfasts and luncheons by the dozen. Ah, yes; I was young once, and——"

"Handsome!" George cried, standing before her with upraised hat; "but that goes without saying. Many thanks, but I am in training just now, and midday meals are denied me."

"Amy, he's his grandfather all over. Ah, he was a courtly gentleman; and to think there's his poor grave, and we are reading his epitaph, and your mother says—Amy, it's ridiculous of you to be his mother. Why, only yesterday you scratched yourself getting through that hedge, and you never stopped crying till you had some honey on bread and butter—and now he wants to come to his grandfather's church. Cousin George—if I may claim the relationship—which, indeed, does me honor—I can tell you this, what *can* be done to get you here as curate, *shall* be done. My brother is one of the leading men—I may say the leading man of this town—it would be hard if he can't get our dear Amy's son—and dear Mr. Vernon's, too, of course—taken on by our rector—a good man—a *very* good man, though, of course, not to equal that——" She

noddled sadly at Mr. Lavender's tomb, and sniffed. Then catching sight of the painter passing out of the gate, she called to him patronizingly, "Good-afternoon, John, and how is Sarah?"

"Middling fairish," was the man's reply.

"She was absent from church," she continued. "I thought she must be ill."

"Something amiss with her clo's, most like," he rejoined awkwardly, fidgeting to be let off further questioning.

"And what text has old Wright chosen for that poor dawdle-me-do of a son?" she continued. "I see you've just been at his grave."

"'The Master be come, and calleth for 'e,'" he replied; "and them capitals be prodigal, they be, miss. There's the chapter and verse to be hitched on, when the rector 'ev found it out; but old Wright he knows it's somewhere in the Scripintures."

Miss Lee fired up, exclaiming excitedly, "John, I wonder you're not ashamed to paint such a mockery! Do you really believe *The Master* called him?"

"Well, miss, you see, it's like this: on tombstones, we gives 'em the benefit of the doubt. 'Twixt you and me, and the gentleman and lady, I don't think he'd be much of a bargain for anybody; but it's pretty reading, and we must consider them that comes along. It baint as if it made any odds to the dead; that's how I take it."

"And the late dear rector, my revered cousin," Miss Lee continued, "to think there should be such shams in his 'jewel-case,' as he called the graveyard—so poetical! You see," she added, dismissing the man with a wave of her hand and a bow, and addressing George, "so many Riverham people are Dymonds—and old-fashioned folk pronounce the precious stones in that way—and so many are called Purls, and a few are Rubies—that the dear rector loved to pun upon the words. Such a quaint, ingenious conceit, to be sure! and now he's the most precious jewel of all. Ah, me!"

George glanced at his mother, but she was too well accustomed to her cousin's peculiarities to notice this. All she said was:

"Don't let us miss the train, Cousin Anna."

"I wish I could keep you altogether," was the rejoinder as they left the cemetery and proceeded up a by-street. "Dear thing! Ah, Cousin George, your mother was my charge when she was hardly two years old, a little, little toddles—so fat! oh, so fat!—*and such a temper*—'Spitfire' was her dear pa's name for her; but

a little rod and my humble means transformed the darling. Hasn't she a sweet temper now, Cousin George? Ah, a regular lump of delight, as I dare say your most respected papa has long ago discovered. Indeed, no doubt you all bask in the sunshine of her smiles."

"Cousin Anna," Mrs. Vernon cried at last, "you shall not go with us to the station, if you don't talk sense! Do you hear?"

Miss Lee laughed delightedly. "She tries to rule even me!" she exclaimed, shaking her curls at George. "Well, I won't say another word. And here's that untidy Jane Purl, trailing her gown behind her. Jane," she said, stopping a slatternly looking woman who approached, "come to my house this evening, and bring your thimble with you. My Susan shall help you to tack up your tail. Now, don't give me the trouble of fetching you."

"You are still despotic," said Mrs. Vernon.

"No one shall go far wrong in Riverham, if I can help it," she answered—"at least, no Church folks. I don't interfere with the chapelites. Now, what is Mary Dymond doing with that heap of French beans? Throwing them to her pig, I do believe!"

A woman leaning over a pigstye in a little garden close to the street stopped what she was doing as she recognized Miss Lee's voice.

"We hev such a heap," she said, as she withheld the half of what she had in her basket; "they'd only rot in the ground, miss."

"Come to my house this evening, Mrs. Purl," said Miss Lee sternly, "and I'll show you how to pickle them for winter use, and what you have to spare, I'll buy to send to the London hospitals. I could weep when I see such wanton waste."

The woman courtesied and went into her cottage.

Miss Lee shook her head, and for a moment mused on the wickedness of human nature; then her face beamed again.

"Look!" she said, craning her neck to watch a young couple turning a distant corner, "I do declare it's Ellen Lark and Jo Ruby arm-in-arm. Well, that *is* capital! capital! Well, I *am* thankful. Ah, this will interest Cousin George, I know! There they go! Well, I must tell you Jo Ruby paid a great deal of attention to Ellen Lark last year at the fair-time—such a nice girl, one of my Bible-class. I never knew her make a mistake in the Catechism, not even as a child, in, 'What desirest thou of God in the Lord's prayer?' Amy, *you* never mastered that, but she did. *And then I heard how everyone remarked on Jo's attentions, and*

yet he never came forward like a man. I *was* vexed. I waited over the school treat and the choir treat and the mayor's treat, and still the gossips nudged and laughed ; and he was always ready for her at the church door, and made errands to where she lived as housemaid, and I couldn't get her mistress to interfere, so I did. I sent for Jo, and I put it before him. I said, ' Now, here's a young woman of the greatest respectability, with £3 15s. and 10d., as I know for a fact, already saved up in the Savings Bank, out of her wages of £10 a year. Hadn't you better make up your mind before someone else snaps her up? I know one or two most desirable young fellows are looking toward her.' Ah, yes, a man won't shilly-shally as soon as he thinks there's a rival in the way. And Jo glared at me when I said that. ' Now, Jo,' I said, ' I've known you ever since you squalled through the Christening Service, and made your poor mother fit to drop with vexation and heat, and I've known Ellen ever since she was old enough to come to Sunday school, and I see you are both suited to each other ; so I take the trouble to give you a hint, for girls are girls, and they are apt to take the first who offers.' "

George opened his eyes wide as she stopped to take breath, for they had quickened their steps as they neared the omnibus.

" And did Jo act on your advice ? " he asked, as he helped her up the steps into the shaky conveyance.

" Why, of course he did. And, as you see, I've made them happy forever after ; for there they go, arm-in-arm ; and that's Riverham fashion, when ' keeping company ' becomes ' going to marry.' "

As soon as they had started, she commenced a conversation with the ' bus boy, showing a thorough knowledge of his doings and belongings. When at last they were in the train, and she had vehemently bidden them come again soon, Mrs. Vernon sank back exhausted but laughing.

" Are you still sure you would like to get the curacy of Riverham, Georgy ? " she asked.

CHAPTER XVI

CONVICTIONS

THE three Marleon girls were waiting when Mrs. Vernon and George reached home. They had brought the little boys home after spending the day at their grandmother's, and had waited, to keep the peace between them, till their mother's return.

Harold was just at the mischievous age, and delighted in frightening and bullying his little brother. Again and again poor Arthur would wake up at night trembling, and be afraid to say more than "Giants, mammy!" when questioned, so real to him were the dreams born of his brother's terrifying stories. Harold feared nothing. He scoffed at danger and scorned reproof, and he had no elder brother constantly near to "sit upon him." His love for his mother made him obedient to her, and his self-esteem made him work well at school; but with his little brother he knew neither tenderness nor fear. A howl of dismay from Arthur was music to him, and the child's terror of blood-curdling stories, which Harold whispered when they were left alone in their beds on either side their mother's—a terror displayed by audible shudders and faint entreaties of "Oh, please don't, Harold!"—were delicious tributes to his power of graphic delineation.

He was no favorite with his schoolfellows—"the first Vernon to be disliked" was their verdict—but his industry and ability beyond his years made him a favorite with his masters. The Marleon girls distrusted him, and in Dalrymple's visits home they made him do what he could to keep the boy down; but Dalrymple was too full of himself to trouble much about a child he still looked upon as a mere baby.

Dalrymple had acquired some of the swagger a residence at Sandhurst sometimes confers on a cadet. Constantia was no longer the light of his eyes, though he still liked to come home and find her willing to listen to and laugh with him.

The three sisters were all grown up now; only Constantia was still a schoolgirl, though in her last year at school. They were the *beauties of Cotley*, and but for their brown eyes would have

been types of English loveliness. Titania had shot up above Urania, and was the tallest of the three well-grown girls ; but they all had the same shade of hair, the same complexions, the same small, white, even teeth, the same gracious feminine manner—the coloring altogether of the typical Englishwoman—the abundant golden-brown hair, rosy rounded cheeks, oval forehead, and softly sketched, crescent-shaped eyebrows. Yet they were each unlike the other. There was a distinct individuality, a decided though subtle difference. Their very movements differed the one from the other, and those who knew them best wondered outsiders should ever be puzzled by a similarity they failed to recognize.

Titania and Constantia were playing tennis against Harold, who believed himself equal to any number of girls, when Mrs. Vernon and George entered the garden, while Urania sat on the steps of the Japanese tea house, with Toby on her knee, telling him some simple story suitable to his comprehension.

George noted the three girls with admiring eyes, the graceful agility of the two younger—the sweet girl-motherliness of the elder—yet he stood cold and silent, while the others broke out into surprised laughter and talk.

“There was so much to tell,” Titania cried, while Constantia nearly suffocated Mrs. Vernon with kisses of welcome, and Urania picked up the tossed-aside bats and balls—only a few hours’ absence, yet so much to hear. First, there was a letter from Mr. Marleon. He was coming home !—actually coming home at last ; and, best of all, he was coming here to Cotley. They were to ask Mrs. Vernon to help them to choose a house—a house in Cotley—and they would all be housekeepers ; no, not all at once, but to take it in turns, to order dinner and all that, and they would never be separated from dear Aunt Gertrude and Aunt Isoline ; and when Aunt Isoline’s young man came back, they’d be her bridesmaids.

Aunt Isoline’s “young man’s” return was a never failing topic for conjecture, and some little amusement to the younger generation. To them he was almost mythical, and his return appeared as unlikely as that of King Arthur ; only Urania—who was privileged to hear bits of his letters—felt he was real flesh and blood, and only short of perfection, inasmuch he could let the years go by, and yet be content to live without a wife. If she could have seen all those closely written letters, she would have scrupled to use the adjective.

In a flutter of excitement they all went into the dining room where the evening meal awaited the travellers, and continued to discuss the unexpected news. There was other news, too, in the father's letter, news of the Holroyds. Flossy had run away with an Italian lawyer, a Roman Catholic, and a member of a peasant family.

"What could they expect?" Mr. Marleon added. "They've only themselves to blame; thought more of the girl's accent than of anything else, and this is the result. After her marriage, she wrote to her father, to beg he would make her an allowance, as her husband was not yet established in his profession, and had no private means. But in their bitter disappointment, her parents merely sent her clothes to her, without any remark whatever, and left Italy without leaving any address.

"I shall see them in town, when I return," Mr. Marleon added, "and will do my best to make peace. They cannot be so inhuman as to cast her off entirely. She must have repented her folly bitterly long before now."

"Why shouldn't she be very happy?" Constantia asked. "He needn't be a rogue because he's an Italian lawyer!"

"Is she fond of macaroni and garlic, I wonder?" George said.

"Probably he's married her that he might live an idle life," Mrs. Vernon said. "He'd think Colonel Holroyd enormously rich."

"No, he can't be rich, or he wouldn't have persuaded her to run away. That shows he knew the Holroyds would object to him; but he evidently thought they'd come round when the marriage was actually accomplished, that poor foolish girl!"

Titania thought the climate and the grapes would make up for a great deal, and Constantia suggested he probably sang delightfully.

"And washes himself once a year!" George cried. "Well, I'm not much surprised. I shall never forget her pocket-handkerchief; it was all in holes, and as black as my boot; but it was covered with scent, and she flourished it about with all the conceit imaginable. Oh, she won't mind garlic, and I'm not sure I don't pity him most."

But Mrs. Vernon was quite unhappy, and planned a visit to London, that she might intercede for poor Florence. She was sure the best plan would be to bring the young couple to England, and get work for him, that her parents might be sure she was neither starved nor unkindly treated, nor forced to give up her religion.

"They must not throw her over," she cried excitedly, "just when she needs help most. What would any of us do, if God forsook us directly we chose to disobey him?"

Luckily a cry for "mammy" to hear the little boys their prayers diverted her for the moment; but her solicitude sobered the young people, and as George escorted them home they were as quiet as George himself, for he, struck by his mother's remark, had passed back into the mood of mental questioning which had possessed him at Riverham. He was happy to a certain extent because Urania was by his side silently pacing with him along the quiet road, the other two talking to each other a little apart—for the younger sisters knew George's admiration for the elder, as well as he knew it himself; but even with his contentment a disquieting fear possessed him, lest, in this new life, this future of which he only knew that it was to be entered upon, it would be impossible to keep near her. All the bright coloring had faded from the sky, leaving a clear, pale, opaline tint over a cloudless expanse, and against it Urania's profile stood out in soft, perfect lines of youthful purity. His eyes rested upon it with tender admiration. No doubt she knew his gaze was upon her, but it caused her no embarrassment; to her he was still only one of the Vernon boys, as good as a cousin, if not as good as a brother, certainly not raised on a pinnacle above the rest of his sex, as Mr. Doughty had once been raised. Her girlish admiration for the curate had faded in the sorrow which had suddenly fallen upon her, and the reality of death had blurred out the sweet picture of ideality of life. Then he had passed out of her ken, and her hero-worship had died out for want of feeding. She was fancy free now, and could smile to remember her former admiration; could smile, too, at her sister's hints as to George's liking for her. "Silly girls!" she said; "you will know, when you are older, that young men are not necessarily in a chronic state of falling in love." To which they would retort she was a regular old maid, and knew nothing at all about young men's folly.

George managed to break the silence at last by expressing his pleasure that they were to live in Cotley.

"Yes," she replied, "I, too, am delighted. I always dreaded going away where we should lose sight of you all."

"You think of us in a lump," he retorted.

She turned her face and looked up at him in some surprise as she replied:

"Yes, but individually as well, of course; besides, most of you

boys are vanishing. I dare say, when you get a curacy, we shall only see you once a year or so."

"And out of sight is out of mind, you wish to infer?"

"Ah, that is wilful misconstruction, George!"

"No, no, it is not. You are a grown-up young lady. I am a boy. You are too polite to say it, but that's what you mean."

She was huffed. "Oh, of course, if you know my mind better than I know it myself, there is no more to be said!" she explained, and George hesitated for a moment before he stood on his defence.

"All I know of you can be but what I see and hear outside. But surely words convey the mind's workings? At least, they do with you and me, I hope. I only know what you said; and surely you don't deny you called me a boy, and spoke of my going away, and keeping away, and almost disappearing altogether—'vanishing,' you called it—as coolly as if I were a—a—dog belonging to the family—nothing more."

"O George!" she cried, with quick perception of his pain, "do you really believe what you are saying? How you must hate me! but——"

"I'm not a boy even in years," he interrupted, "and I'm three years at least older than you; but I am very ready to let you call me a boy, if only you can explain away the other inference."

"Your inference, you mean?"

He was so tall above her that, when she looked into his face, she had to straighten herself to her fullest height; and as she did so then, he fancied it was a movement less of convenience than of dignity. But as the light fell on her eyes, he saw they were wet with tears, and at once his anger and distress changed from her to himself.

"Oh, don't mind what I've said!" he cried. "I must be a mere boy to behave in this way, to annoy you like this—a perfect bear. But I'm going back to college to-morrow, and the term is a long one. When I come back, will you have forgiven me, Ranny, but not forgotten me, dear?"

Something in his tone, in the long dropped abbreviation of her name, too, softened her toward him.

"If I were likely to forget you," she said, "I should soon be forced to remember you, if you are as successful this term as you always are. But, as if we, as if I, could forget you! Why, George, what makes you fancy these unkind things?"

"If I were not so successful," he asked, bending down so that he

needed to speak hardly above a whisper, "if it should happen I had ceased to value college distinctions ; if I find there are other and greater things to gain than I have tried for yet ; things that the world despises, and for which there are no prizes at college, would you care to remember me as a—friend, a real friend still ?"

Of course she was unable to follow his meaning, though she was impressed by his manner. They had reached the streets, too, and her sisters had come up closer behind them. She was impatient to make him hold himself erect, and to stop any possible remarks of the girls, so she answered more warmly than she intended, smiling as she spoke :

"No more inferences, or you will get rabid again, so I won't say you as good as call me a time-server. Pray don't doubt my friendship being able to stand reverses of fortune. I think—yes, I am sure, I can be 'a friend that is born for adversity.' But I know you won't need such a friend. Nevertheless, I am very proud that you value my friendship, such a great scholar as you are !"

She laughed lightly, and they turned into the deep shade of Great Street, close to old Mrs. Vernon's house. George's heart was full of rapture. He took his companion's slim hand, and held it till they reached the door.

Urania made no attempt to withdraw it—his strong grasp seemed to give her strength and protection. Surely there was nothing in walking a few steps hand-in-hand with "one of the Vernon boys," especially in the dusk ; but when the door was opened, and the sisters bade him good-night, he still retained it, and at the last moment gave it an impressive squeeze, saying, as he released it :

"Good-by, my dear true friend."

"Your eyes shine like stars !" old Mrs. Vernon said to her as she followed her sisters into the library. "But you mustn't reckon too much on your father coming here, my love. Men change their minds."

Was it fatherly affection beautifying the girl's bright eyes ?

"What has come over Vernon ?" George's college friends asked each other during that Christmas term. "What has come over Vernon ?" was repeated by the masters and tutors ; while George himself, living in the familiar scenes among the familiar faces, wondered most of all at his changed ambitions, and for some time found no answer to the question he asked again and again, in *perplexity and distress* :

"Lord, what wouldst thou have me to do ?"

Not till he had lost his pride in his intellect and attainments ; not till he had lost all desire to outstrip all his fellow-students ; not till he came to value property all the hitherto coveted honors and prizes, and to weigh aright the fading laurels of university distinctions, did the answer come.

Hitherto he had been satisfied to know men of like tastes with his own. All the rest of the mass of the men, split up as they were into coteries of many minds, he had left unnoticed. He had joined in their sports genially, but in their feasts he had cared for no part. Though essentially a "reading man," he was still at college, as he had been at school, a leading man at cricket and on the river, but he had given no undue time to these mere amusements, nor caused his college to fear he would sacrifice the one for the other nobler ambition. There were certain members of the university who were classed by the thoughtless as "Pi." George himself had not scoffed at them, but he had smiled when his companions scoffed, and had considered them as "a dull lot." To be sure, they were by no means wanting in intellectual and manly attainments ; but he had felt no interest in them ; they rarely came in his way, and he had been content with his own set till what seemed a mere accident suddenly brought him into intimate acquaintance with one of the older members of the derided lot. The rooms above his were tenanted by a freshman, a youth whose boyhood had been strictly supervised by a taciturn, uncompromising mother. The sudden emancipation had acted as might be expected on a weak-headed, inexperienced young fellow, and he was rapidly acquiring an unenviable notoriety for his folly and his intemperance. One night he fell backward as he was reeling upstairs, and lay helpless and bruised at George's door.

Full of disgust, yet willing to be of use, George lifted him in his strong arms, carried him up to his rooms, and put him to bed, and, learning from his bedmaker that he had a cousin at college, went off for him as soon as it was light.

"One of the Pies," he said to himself, as he knocked at Mr. Lathom's door.

The way in which the latter received his news rather astonished him, it was so exactly what he himself would have said.

"If only I might use a horsewhip, and beat the devil out of him !" Mr. Lathom cried ; "the young beast !" Then, as they strode through the streets together, he added, "Never mind ; he's down now. *It will be odd if we can't make something out of it.*"

He added something very handsome about George's successes, too, heartily and pleasantly.

"This Pi was decidedly a good fellow, whatever the rest of them might be."

The boy's injuries were serious, and a long illness was the result. By degrees Lathom and George struck up a friendship over the sick-bed, and very soon the former never visited his cousin without looking in on George, till through his means George saw a light gradually illumine his perplexity, and little by little in their subsequent talks there came an answer that satisfied the trembling, doubting disciple.

"Is Saul also among the prophets?" he was asked, when his former companions found he had thrown in his lot with the Pies, and Sunday breakfasts and desserts knew him no more, and his energies and talents were brought to bear upon the needs of the classes for whom the Pies labored. But the shamefacedness he not unnaturally felt at first soon wore off, and he remained popular with his former associates, spite of his new views. His part was more difficult with the authorities; they feared to lose the laurels he was so capable of winning for them; and when he withdrew his name from one or two examinations, by success in which he would have gained a permanent position in the university exactly suited to his polished talents and great capacity, the dons of his college took the trouble to send for him in conclave, and condescended to enquire into his reasons, and endeavored to persuade him against them.

He could only say he appreciated their kindness, but his views had changed, and he stood before them so modestly, and spoke so simply, that they saw there was nothing more to be said. Their disappointment George keenly felt, but no thought of retracting could he entertain.

Hardest thing of all was the telling his parents. And what was he to tell them? He had already disappointed his father in declining to follow in his footsteps; and the comfort his mother had drawn from the idea of having him either a college don or a comfortable Churchman in England, ever at hand, while his brothers were scattered over the face of the globe, must now be overthrown also. There were plenty of men, he could tell them, either by health or circumstances, family ties and family responsibilities, suited to Church work in England—even the town's slums had an army of workers, soldiers against vice. The home vicarages and rectories and cures had organized bands of helpers, for the laity

had awakened to the knowledge of their responsibility. But what about the "poor sheep in the wilderness," the stragglers over the Australian continent, the settlers on the lonely sheep-runs, and the pestilential farms of Africa? What would they say when he told them he had determined, while his health was good, his energies untiring, his manhood in its first freshness, to cast away his hard-won distinctions, to draw back his hand from the honors almost within his grasp, to turn his back on the safe comfort of an English cure, on the home life so bright and wholesome, to exile himself, that a few families whose unbaptized children, unhallowed lives and deaths, and brute-like habits, might be purified and humanized—a few families scattered far from each other and civilization, whom whether they were brutes or Christians mattered not one jot to the rest of the world? How could he expect sober-minded relations to bid him Godspeed in such a chimerical exploit?

Yet such was his resolve—the resolve of that small society of "Pies," to fit themselves—not for the world's distinctions, but for the help and comfort of the few lost sheep in the wilderness.

In two years George could be ordained. Two years would not be too long a time to devote to preparation to acquire practical knowledge, to become a carpenter, a farmer, and as much as possible a doctor, as well as a priest. There was a little sum of money left him by his godmother, to which he looked for help, should his father refuse to sanction his scheme. It was of his father's refusal he thought most; his mother would probably grieve, but she would not strive to dissuade him, if he assured her his conscience was his guide. Of one other's opinion he hardly liked to think at all, lest he should be tempted to turn aside from the path he had determined to follow.

"One step enough for me," he argued. Life was young yet to her and to him; he was not yet sure of her affection, nor could he yet gauge the depth of his own. At his age obstacles are flimsy, possibilities are innumerable, and the ardor of youth overlooks the difficulties which dim the hopes of maturity.

As the term drew toward its close, he was made to smart by the changed manner of some of the dons who had previously courted and patronized him, though he recognized the thinness of that regard which had been paid less to the man than to the credit he could gain for his teachers.

"And now," he said bitterly, "now, when I am really far better worth *their notice*, they turn the cold shoulder upon me."

It was fortunate that he had little time for these reflections. His new friends were no dreamers and schemers ; and George had been greatly astonished to find that, utterly unsuspected by the majority, these few had organized charities and night schools in the town, and devoted their entire leisure to unpaid work among the very poor. To assist in these unpaid and unrecognized labors George had been easily persuaded, and had found his reward in the deep interest which sprang up and put into the background minor vexations and petty annoyances.

When he looked back at his former content, it was with shuddering wonder that he could ever have made so false an estimate of life's duties—could ever have trifled over the surface bubbles of earthly wisdom, while close at his feet lay a seething mass of brutalized humanity—souls born to the same eternal glories as those who wore purple and fine linen, needing ceaseless help, ceaseless supervision, to make them conscious of their degraded condition.

It was in doing his utmost to help the devoted little band to foster the germs of divinity among these miserable creatures that he acquired the conviction that he was answering his Master's call aright, and with this conviction his happy spirits came back too, enabling him to take his old friends' jokes good-naturedly, and to give banter for banter.

His athletic training stood him in good part in his new work; his height and boyish face attracted the stunted, old-before-their-time young men of the slums, and the courage he displayed in one or two tussles which took place in crowded meetings, where an injudicious word or act would have set the entire crowd of inflammable natures into a blaze of disorderly tumult, made him respected.

"'E's a chap as can use his fists as well as 'e uses his tongue. I reckon I'd rather not earn a rough blow from either," one of the crowd had said in Lathom's hearing, and after that the elder man felt he could trust his new friend alone for the future.

It was the first week in December before George began to consider how his Cotley friends would regard the absence of his name from the school lists, when a telegram from home reached him, making all beside as nothing compared to his dread of what it portended. It said merely :

"Come home at once." And it had been sent off in the night, for he received it in the twilight of the cold gray dawn.

CHAPTER XVII

SUPERSTITION

AMY VERNON went to London to see the Holroyds, and found them much more disgusted than distressed. They took no blame to themselves, but, on the contrary, declared Florence to be devoid of gratitude and affection. They wondered where she had got her "low tastes," and tried to fix them as inherited from a remote ancestor, who had been a "Puritan nobody." Indeed, by their account, their sons, who were unfortunate, too, in their colonial investments, also were indebted to her for their misfortunes.

Mrs. Holroyd was very bitter against Mr. Marleon, too. "He actually insinuated," she explained, "that we were wrong in allowing her to associate with these people. I should like to know how she was to learn the language if we had boxed her up? To think how we sacrificed ourselves for her good, and that she should act so basely! But we have done with her. All her letters go back unopened. We can't think why our children should be such failures—and the money we've spent on them!"

Mrs. Vernon did her best to soothe them. She pictured Florence needing their care more now than she had ever needed it. She begged them to reflect they were throwing her adrift just when it was absolutely necessary she should have some ballast. "Only acknowledge her marriage," she pleaded, "that you may have some hold upon her husband. Forgiveness and kindness now might bind him to you and her forever; but if you raise his anger, he may visit it on her. She is very young and inexperienced; she has a right to your love, whatever she may do contrary to your wishes."

"I deny it," Colonel Holroyd cried. "We have a right to her dutiful obedience. I'll acknowledge no beggarly organ-grinder of an Italian."

"I thought he was a lawyer," she replied, with a mischievous smile.

He burst out laughing. "You wait," he cried, "till a son of yours goes directly contrary to your wishes, and then see if your *love is sufficient to heal the smart.*" Then he talked of his boys.

"The foolish fellows *would* emigrate, would sink their money on land, and now ask his assistance to start them again. More than that--actually suggest he should go to them and make a home. Did you ever hear of such presumption?"

She was silent. Mrs. Holroyd took up the strain. "And there's Fanny," she cried, "left at an expensive school, and done absolutely nothing; and now she thinks we ought to take her away to enjoy herself. But I'm not going to be disgraced twice. It is time we considered our own comfort and convenience. We must have rest and amusement first, and when she has proved herself appreciative of our kindness in fitting her for society, I shall send her to my sister at Calcutta. I don't think she'll be in the way of beggarly adventurers there."

She was very curious about "those poor Marleon girls who had been dragged up to be fit for nothing but pupil teachers," and was much struck to hear how well they had turned out.

Mrs. Vernon felt she could say nothing to convince them they owed any further duty to Florence, though she tried again as she said good-by, and would have resented their obstinacy but for the affectionate way in which they parted from her.

"You are a dear, well-meaning friend," the colonel said, "but too soft-hearted for this world. If I could be convinced against my own calm judgment, it would be by you." While his wife kissed her again and again, and envied her way "of seeing only the bright side."

They were a part of her life in India, in those years when death and separation had made the sunshine unendurable. They had lived side by side, and shared the same society then, and had the same memories now; so, for old acquaintance' sake, she could not condemn their mistaken views, and as she went back to Cotley alone, her thoughts were unusually full of the recollections seeing them again had conjured up. She thought of the warmth, and brightness, and fun, and kindness of the Indian station, and contrasted it with the gloom and chill she was experiencing in this English December; and when her mind was full of India, it was also full of regret for the separation from her husband. It was only when she was alone she suffered these yearnings to overshadow her. Few of her associates ever guessed how poignant that yearning was.

"Such a bright spirit," they told each other; "so happy in the present. She's the right sort to have such a life."

For she never let anyone know, except in those diary letters, how the years which kept her apart from him dragged with a terrible length. "So many mercies," she would say to herself, "so many blessings. Why do I suffer because I am denied one thing?" Yet, as the train carried her on out of the dark, muddy streets of London, out of the slums of its outskirts, on into the country, something of cheer came to her with the clearer air and further expanse. The day had been what the Scotch call "soft"—a miserable state of things in a big town where horses' feet and rapid wheels fling liquid mud around, and pavements are coated with a greasy black paste; but which, out away from the influence of thousands of chimneys and the exhalations of a great river, robs winter of its sting for the time, and paints the barren fields with soft lights and shadows which take one back to autumn. The leafless trees, no longer stark and dank, rise up in graceful pencilled lines against the pale, soft sky, and the blackbird and the thrush, deceived by the mildness, begin to salute the spring.

As Mrs. Vernon leaned forward, watching the last houses of London's suburbs recede behind her, she, too, felt the cheering influence of the calm, quiet scene. The evening light was casting purple shading on the eastern landscape; but the sunset radiance streamed over the west. The earth might be exhausted for the time, the trees no longer clothed and fruitful; but overhead there was light and color, which, with a wealth of splendor, burnished the ponds and streams, decked the sodden fields with flashing jewels, and bathed the lowly village churches, the stucco farm-houses, and mean cottages in a very Shekinah of glory. Across the pale opal of the winter sky lay cloudlets of brilliant vermilion, tender gray, and fiery orange. Serried banks of tawny shading floated in the lower glory. The glittering hosts of heaven could hardly present a more dazzling appearance.

Someone in the carriage said it was a "remarkable sky; indeed, portentous"; but Mrs. Vernon delighted in the radiance, and grudged its rapid fading. It drew her thoughts to a happier theme.

She drove to Great Street, when she reached Cotley. It was still her custom to report herself to Great-aunt Jane after a day's absence, but she dismissed the cab when she reached her mother-in-law's. She was so well, and the weather so mild, she would enjoy walking home afterward.

Great-aunt Jane was not very well, Isoline told her sister-in-law. For Aunt Jane's "temper" her relations kindly substituted

"health," in mentioning her mood. "And all," added Isoline, as she drew Amy into the dining room, to take off her cloak, "because I've had a letter from Fred ; and he may be back next year !" she cried, with clasped hands and a sudden rapture. "And Aunt Jane thinks," she added, going back to her usual placid manner, "we shall neglect her for him. She actually said, 'He may as well stay where he is. I wouldn't take up with a bag of dried bones, if I were a young woman.'"

Amy burst out laughing, and poor Isoline caught the infection and joined in. They had done their best to keep their voices down, but the old lady's sharp senses were too much for them, and presently her voice rang down from her post of observation :

"I don't want your secrets, but I should like somebody to treat me with some consideration. I shan't bother you long."

Amy and Isoline sprang up the stairs like guilty schoolgirls, and Amy made her peace by offering her a smart collar bought in town. The old woman accepted the present, and allowed herself to be kissed and amused. She sat in her warm, bright room, the door as usual partly open, as a post of vantage ; her parrot asleep on his perch, her stand of gay flowers, her books and biscuits at hand, and old Mrs. Vernon at her beck and call while Smith was absent at tea.

Amy had learned to weave her account of the day's doings into a romance. Her fatigue, or disappointment, or heart-sickness, never appeared in these lively recitals for the amusement of the old, old life whose pleasures were so few ; and the effort always brought its rewards, as unselfish efforts always do. So when she went out from the affectionate relations and the warm house, she felt cheerful and braced up again. Now for her little boys, her own comfortable home, additions to the foreign letters—to her dear William and Fabian, and that dearest of all, their father—that nightly talk with the absent which so shortened her solitary evenings, till it should be time to end with that last communion on her knees before that mighty Father in whose hands are the issues of life and death.

"Not even the 'pale light of stars,'" she said to herself, as she walked briskly up the suburban road, where the spaces between the gas-lamps were so wide that in places it was difficult to see sufficiently to avoid stepping into the puddles of the ill-made sidewalk. *She was a coward, notwithstanding her brave assurances so lately uttered when her mother-in-law would have had her drive home ;*

and as she plunged into each fresh shadow, her heart beat violently. How much nicer it would have been to have had her carriage still. But then, again, how nice it would be to hear her husband's congratulations when he found how prudent she had been, how well she had done her share of self-denial. For a moment she forgot her foolish fears in the solitude and dark, as she pictured his smile over her neatly kept accounts and balance at the bank ; but her pulses quickened again as she suddenly became aware a figure was moving onward with her on the field side of the road. It might be her own silly fancy, she told herself as she gained the influence of the next lamp ; for no one was then visible. But as she again passed into the mid obscurity, she was certain of steps just across the way, dogging her steps ; and as she almost flew onward, she was enabled to distinguish a tall figure quickly gliding back into the darkness, as if to let her pass on while he remained unseen till he could again follow in safety.

Her house was almost the last in the road. All the houses stood a little way back, enclosed in gardens more or less well sheltered in trees and high shrubs, and shut in with wide iron gates. "Should she seek help in the nearest, and ask someone to escort her home ?" Her fears were so great she almost decided this would be best. Then, again, she thought how silly it would seem, and only because she had seen a man who evidently meant no ill to her, or he would have addressed her. What would her women-servants think of her cowardice, too—they who continually went in and out of Cotley at much later hours, and never feared or met with anything disagreeable ? No, she would not allow herself to give way to causeless fear. There was but one more shadowed part, and then her own gate was close by. It received sufficient light to enable one to see the handle, and then the light from her own hall should stream out over the broad gravel drive, and she would be safe at home. Valiantly she plunged, therefore, into the next gloomy space ; and though her legs tottered, and she could scarcely breathe for terror as she again listened to the steps plunging through the mud by the hedge, she managed to gain once more the first influence of the light, and to grasp her own gate at last. But just as she raised the latch the mysterious steps crossed the intervening space, and looking terrified behind her, she beheld—her husband !

With a shriek that rang through the quiet neighborhood, she gazed for an instant at his tall form standing close beside her, *noticed the wan, thin, ghostly face, the deep-set eyes which seemed*

to burn in their sockets, and then with but one idea—that he was dead, and had come for one farewell look—she dashed over the gravel walk ; and as her alarmed servants appeared at the front door, she sank fainting before them.

Supposing she had been frightened by a tramp, one of the maids, while the others raised their mistress and carried her to a sofa, ran off to the gate in search of the miscreant ; but there was neither sight nor sound of anyone, only the faint drip of water from the sodden trees and shrubs and a very faint hum from the traffic in the distant town. No step, no movement nearer, and the woman closed the gate securely and ran back shivering to the house.

Mrs. Vernon was recovering, her little boys were peeping at her, the youngest crying bitterly, the other full of curiosity.

"That woman was drunk who fell down like that in the street the other day," Harold whispered to the cook, who was holding her sides, and breathing heavily, after carrying her mistress.

"You imp !" she retorted. "Do you suppose your ma is like that? Poor, blessed lady ! Wasn't there nobody about?" she added, addressing her fellow-servant, as she came forward.

"Nobody," said Hannah, shaking her head.

"It might be a ghost," Harold continued, opening his eyes wide at his little brother, whose tears stopped at the supposition as if frozen with chill horror. "I told you there was ghosts in winter, didn't I?"

His mother's eyes unclosed and looked round her with questioning fear, Arthur darted to her side, buried his face in her neck, and burst into a fresh paroxysm of terror.

It was the best thing for her. Her mother's love recalled her from the region of horror and death. She raised herself, and drew the child to her lap, soothing herself as she soothed him.

Harold drew her attention next. "I really did think you might be drunk," he said, with a sigh of heartfelt relief as he looked at her ; and his words, which caused the servants dismay and disgust, so amazed her as to draw her still nearer the prosaic world of flesh and blood, and to repel most completely the ghastly fears that had for the moment possessed her.

"Harold," she said, feebly struggling to laugh hysterically, "is it possible you could think such a thing of me?"

The women remained officiously offering different remedies in *their anxiety* to learn what had happened. *Hannah was the first to hint that an explanation was looked for.*

"I ran out to the gate," she said, "but the thieves had made off. I couldn't see nothing."

"Ugh!" Arthur cried, wriggling violently in dread. "Ugh! Was it a ghost?"

"We heard the scream!" cook exclaimed. "I expect that frightened 'em off. I could have dropped, when I heard it."

"I thought it was giants," poor little Toby continued. "Tell us, mammy, was it giants?"

Mrs. Vernon with difficulty controlled herself sufficiently to attempt some reasonable explanation. "I am a sad coward, you know," she said. "I had gone to grandmamma's as soon as I arrived, and it was quite dark when I came away; and you know I was very tired with a long day in London, and it was so dark up this road, and there were so many puddles I kept slipping into"—she paused, pondering how she was to go on. Tell the truth she would not. How was she to account for her panic?

"And then"—Harold's eyes were fixed on her, eager for her to go on—"and then did they try to kill you?"

"Oh, no!" she cried. "But I was frightened; and, when I saw them crossing the road toward me, I suppose I screamed. I don't remember how I reached home."

"How many was there?" Arthur asked, keeping his eyes covered with his pinafore. "Do you think they runned into the house, and hid theirselves?" The mere conjecture made him dance again.

His mother dreaded the prolonged excitement for the sensitive child, and forced herself to be calm. "But, darling," she said, folding her arm around him, "you see I am not hurt. Perhaps it was only someone who had lost his way. Women may be cowards sometimes; but men and boys never should be. You won't be a coward, will you?"

Cook said, "Would you wish two of us to run and tell the police, ma'am? They might give the fellows a warning not to frighten ladies."

But her mistress shuddered at the idea of public enquiry being made. She consented to "see about it to-morrow," and suggested it would be best to make sure all the doors and windows were secured; then she made a pretence of eating with the children, and went up to bed with them, feeling their companionship could not be dispensed with. There were no letters written that evening; *and before she sank into a troubled sleep, her hand clasped in her*

youngest boy's, she determined to telegraph to Wattibuldi in the morning—further suspense would kill her.

That her husband was either dead, or in some great extremity, she felt convinced. She recalled the changed, aged face, the gaunt appearance, the dishevelled dress of his apparition, and blamed herself for not having the courage to address it. How miserably weak she had been to fly from the person she so greatly loved, when he had overcome the bonds of death, maybe, in his great love for her—a love truly triumphing over death. Rivers of tears were shed as she lay warm in her bed, with her children on either side, and thought of their father, and of poor Will alone in his trouble. She had always laughed at superstition, and condemned ghostly experiences as stupid fables, but she dare not doubt any longer after her own experience. Her first sleep lasted a very short time, and during the rest of the night she lay shaking as if in ague, and praying without ceasing for strength in this great extremity. No wonder she was worn out when daylight at last arrived and in some measure relieved her, and, when she then lost consciousness, she slept so long that when at last she awoke it was to find her mother-in-law and sisters anxiously watching her. At the first moment of awakening, she forgot the part she had set herself.

"What is it?" she cried. "Is there a telegram? Tell me at once!"

But her relations only knew what Harold had told them on his way to school, and his mother quickly covered her mistake.

"I was startled at seeing you," she added. "What did that fussy child tell you?"

"He quite frightened us—we didn't stay to finish breakfast; but came at once. I hope Aunt Jane won't find out we are not in; of course we didn't tell her."

Harold had made the most of it; he had burst in upon them, declaring his mother had been set upon by a gang of ruffians, that her screams rang through the place, and that at last, when they saw the servants open the front door, they knocked her down and ran away.

Amy laughed, but rather hysterically.

"He lets his imagination run away with him," she said. "I do hope he won't treat his school-fellows to such a story. I wish I'd thought of ordering him not to mention it; but he went before I was awake, you see."

Then she gave her version, "She had seen only one man," she said, "and then she was close at home, and she was overtired and very frightened, and did give one scream, and he said nothing, and did not follow her."

"And what was he like?"

Amy put her hands before her eyes and pictured her husband's gaunt face—so altered, and yet so terribly unmistakable.

"I don't know," she murmured.

"Ah, poor darling! she shan't be asked any more questions," Mrs. Vernon said, "Let us try and make her forget. Now, deary, one of the girls shall stay with you till you get over the fright, and I'll go round by the police-station, and ask them to watch the house for the next few nights. But you may depend upon it the rogue will guess we shall take all precautions, and no doubt he's miles and miles away by this."

Amy broke down and sobbed. "Miles and miles," she repeated, "interminable miles."

The three ladies looked at each other and shook their heads. Mrs. Lancing pulled out her watch, and with great liveliness remarked it was eleven o'clock, and Aunt Jane would be rampageous at their prolonged absence, and Mrs. Vernon tenderly kissed her daughter-in-law, bidding her eat a good breakfast and try to laugh away her fright, and she and Isoline went away, and Gertrude took charge of her sister-in-law.

Amy's spirits could not but rise as she dressed; for Mrs. Lancing's cheerful voice—purposely raised, as she moved about the house, redressing the flowers, looking after the Christmas preparations in the kitchen, and holding lively converse with little Arthur who, with the warm dining room at his disposal, was looking out cards to send to his numerous friends and relations—could not but react upon her. The aunt's laughing sallies, as she went in and out, and the child's continual appeals for her opinion, with the busy movements of the servants, served to scatter the terrible horrors of the night, and when she went downstairs, her eyes had lost their strained, despairing expression, and she could recognize the absurdity of the boy's doings.

He was such a little fellow that he could not sit on an ordinary chair at table with any view over the table's contents, so he had placed four chairs at opposite sides, each chair surmounted by a hassock, thus obtaining the required height to enable him to overlook the heaps of old Christmas cards and valentines which had

descended to him from the well-thumbed collections of his elder brothers—a smudged, discolored, creased and ragged lot for the most part; but on account of vivid coloring, size, gilding, or maybe tender recollections, preserved from year to year, till Harold coming into possession, and having first abstracted all worth having, had tossed them over to Arthur, for “the kid to amuse himself.”

His mother stood for the moment in the doorway, unnoticed; while the child, climbing up and jumping down, on and from his posts of observation, selected, and loudly admired or discarded, and condemned.

“Aunt Gerty!” he cried, “there’s enough, I do fink, to let every boy in the school have one; but how can I get six hundred envelopes? Wouldn’t sugar-bags do?”

Gertrude was satisfied to come in and find Amy following the boy from chair to chair, guarding him from falls, and doing her best to be as interested as he was; nevertheless, she remained weighted with nervous dread, and even as she laughed and talked with the child, it was with the awful feeling that he was fatherless, and that the full responsibility of her boys already rested entirely on her—that there could be no home-coming now, no reunion and happy future—watching their children’s progress—helping them through difficulties, sharing their anxieties, rejoicing in their joys. Was it possible she was henceforth to stand alone, without his advice and help, to be lonely among her children, and yet for their sake to seem to be content? A perfect storm was raging in her breast as she joined in Toby’s glee—self-accusation that she might not have sufficiently prized her blessings, or used her position enough for others’ benefit—all the fears and doubts which beset the conscience, when trouble knocks at the door. Toby, all-unconscious that “things are not what they seem,” only saw the sweet smiling face bent caressingly over him, and heard no echo of the agony in her heart as her tender voice answered his incessant questioning. Sometimes during that long day she decided to telegraph to Will—merely asking if both were well. She would rather be laughed at than endure further suspense, and then again she felt sure a telegram would be sent home; and so every step on the drive, every ring at the bell, was dreaded as the arrival of possible news.

After the early dinner, Harold condescended to play with Arthur, while the mother and aunt sat in the drawing room, packing up Christmas gifts, and directing them.

"The boys are very quiet," Gertrude said presently. "Supposing you go very softly to the dining-room door, and listen? That pickle Harold may be frightening Toby."

"Poor Harold!" Amy said. "You are all down upon him."

"Oh, no, he's no worse than many; but his is the age of unreason; luckily it doesn't last long. Boys of his age seem to be without feeling. My Leonard would perhaps have been the same."

Mrs. Vernon did as she was told, and took her place quietly at the half-open door, whence she could see the two children, who were squatted on the hearthrug. The face of the younger, flushed with excitement, turned to his brother, who, with appropriate gesticulation, was enjoying the little one's terror.

"Yes," he was saying. "It's quite true, there's the poor old creature lying on her bed, in the town. It's a fact, and they won't bury her."

"It isn't true?"

"It's as true as my five fingers," Harold said emphatically, and he spread his hand, covered with chilblains, in the child's face. "The corporation won't, and the workhouse won't, and the cemeteries won't. Poor old woman!"

"Hasn't she no aunts or a granny?"

He shook his head sadly.

"They are all dead and buried."

Arthur sat silent, his pretty eyes darkened with perplexity.

"I'll give my money-box," he said at last. "I shall get some tips soon, you know. Would they do it for that, do you think?"

"Then you'd be hanged for murder!" Harold cried, kicking up his heels and rolling about with delight at the success of his trick. "What should they bury her for? I never said she was dead!"

Poor little Toby looked more perplexed than ever.

"Why isn't she dead?" he whispered, glancing at the shadowed corners apprehensively, as he asked the question.

The other went off into fresh ecstasy. "Oh, my sides'll burst!" he cried. "You are a drivelling idiot, you baby you. Leave the old woman alone."

Toby curled up closer to the speaker. "Tell me something else," he whimpered. "I doesn't like old women."

"Oh, don't you?" Harold exclaimed. "Very well; I'll just tell grandma, and Great-aunt Jane, and *you'll* get no tips, so *you* can't bury that poor old woman. Now, now, don't be a fool," he added,

clapping his hand on the little mouth which was opening into a cry of alarm. "Never mind old women ; you just listen to this. You know ma's bedroom ?"

"O Harold ! Well, what is there ?"

"So do I," was the reply. "Well, that isn't nothing. You know Fluffy's Japanese house ?"

"Yes, of course I does."

"Well, giants live there. Now, don't be a baby, and I'll tell you. I saw one come out this morning, when it was night. He had saucer eyes, and a long nose with hairs on it, and——"

A howl poor Toby could no longer repress turned the tables on Master Harold.

In an instant the mother was there. "You naughty Harold !" she cried, as she lifted the frightened child into her arms. "You wicked boy ! you are a coward and a bully. Big boys and clever boys are always good and kind to little children."

Then she softened down, and kissed the little one, soothing and beguiling him from his fears ; while Harold, left out in the cold, was first defiant, then sarcastic, and finally repentant ; and, there being no witness, he presently stole up to his mother's side, and capitulated.

"You are *my* mammy, too," he said meekly, as Arthur, clasped in her arms, repeated again and again, "Oh, my ducky, mammy."

Amy's arm was presently round the penitent, and he listened to her entreaties, and promised amendment. That was the one happy hour of that long, trying day, when the three, seated in the same big chair in the firelight, spoke to each other, heart to heart, the loving reliance, and tender, perfect trust of the children meeting the pitying, enduring patience of the mother, wrapping all three in the oneness of perfect love.

By and by, when Arthur was out of hearing, Harold told his mother there really was a giant in the Japanese house ; Maria had seen him come out and run across the grass in the dawn ; but had made the boy promise not to tell. She had said no doubt he was one of the tramps who had frightened her mistress.

"Of course," Harold added consolingly, "she couldn't see if he had hairs on his nose, as I told Toby ; but she said he was awfully tall."

Before Mrs. Vernon could make up her mind to interrogate further, the hurried ring at the door she had all day long expected arrived ; but the news it brought was totally unexpected. A cab

had come to bring the two ladies to Great Street, and a note from Isoline hastily explained:

"Aunt Jane has had a fit. Amy and Gertrude must come at once."

CHAPTER XVIII

GREAT-AUNT'S VISITOR

RICHARD VERNON's name had long ceased to be mentioned in young Mrs. Vernon's hearing. He had passed entirely out of her thoughts—put out like a bad dream; and from the day his brother parted from him at the docks, none of the family had heard from him. Now and then, on a gloomy day, for instance, his women-kind would express their wonder as to how he was getting on, and his step-mother never omitted his name from her prayers; but he had gone quite out of ken, and precautions about keeping the hall door locked after dark had long ago ceased to be taken. Even John Lightup, and his feather-brained daughter, had dropped him out of their recollection. Yet he was back again, and in their midst again, a starving outcast.

Amy had never seen him, and if she had ever heard of his resemblance to her husband, she had forgotten it. Indeed, unless she had seen him, it would have been difficult to make her believe any likeness was possible between such opposite characters. So when his worn, haggard countenance was presented to her in the uncertain light, it was not possible to discover the great distinguishing marks between the two. His height, and general appearance, and the nameless family traits common to both, coupled with the strong conviction possessing her overwrought mind that he was come—a spirit from the grave, to bid her a last adieu—had taken unquestioned hold of her, and her inability to discuss the matter with anyone still more firmly persuaded her to believe against her better reason.

Richard had spent the time since his last appearance in England in alternately living on his own exertions and on charity; but his health, broken down by incessant drinking, in time made his power to work not worth remuneration, and charity declined to pension so worthless an object. When he felt pretty certain the New

World was tired of him, he shook its dust from his feet, and worked his way back to the Old World, trusting to find his brother had left Cotley, and to frighten his step-mother and sisters into buying his absence handsomely.

When he entered Cotley wearing a red beard and wig, and stooping so that his height was not remarkable, with shabby, tattered clothes and boots a tramp would have scorned, not even Lightup's quick eyes could have recognized him. At the railway station he inquired the way to Mr. Vernon's, and then learned he was in India. As soon as it was dark, he loitered about Great Street. He was closely watching the house when Amy Vernon went in, and he waited till she came out again. Seeing her alone, and guessing who she was, he determined to try what he could get from her, and for that purpose had pulled off his false hair, and closely followed her. Her unexpected scream and flight had forced him to desist, especially as he knew not what grown-up sons might be in the house, and reflected how little he could do to elude their pursuit. The sound of the servant's step on the gravel decided him to lose no time in hiding himself. When he at last returned to Great Street, and again took shelter under an opposite archway, he was allowed but little opportunity for observation before a policeman saw him, and bade him "Move on." More than that, he asked him what he wanted there, and receiving no answer, turned his bull's-eye full on him ; and evidently not liking what he saw, followed him out of the street, and meeting a fellow-policeman, pointed out the loiterer to him with certain uncomplimentary expressions.

Richard shuffled off, baffled for the time. He was literally penniless, and a small, fine rain was penetrating his miserable coat. Once or twice he made his weary way back toward his old home ; but each time he either saw, or fancied he saw, a policeman in the way. The streets were very empty, and badly lighted. No one in all the familiar place noticed him. He followed one group—a father, mother, and two stripling sons—some distance, because they put him in mind of himself and his brother returning home with his parents from some winter party. He saw them turn in at a gate, where years ago he, too, had entered as into a second home. He laughed at the momentary notion of following them up, and soliciting alms where he had once been a guest. Later on he met a tall young fellow stepping briskly out to a tune he softly whistled. There was a white flower in his button-hole, and a white tie was

visible under his fur-fronted winter coat ; he, too, had been at a party, and his quick, light step showed he had been well amused. His whistle presently changed to a song—something which had struck him from some sweet lips. He sang on in a low tone as he passed Richard, as regardless of him as of the dirt in the road. Gate after gate the wanderer passed, house after house—years ago he could have entered any one of them, and been sure of a kind reception—till he found himself again at the top of the road where his brother lived. Here he encountered another reveller, a drunken one this time, though of the gentle class. Richard stood still, and watched him lurch by. He wore patent-leather boots ; one hand was covered with a dainty, light gray glove, and his clothes were all much too good to be exposed to the rain. Yet, though he held an umbrella, he was in too stupid a condition to use it. He was a tall, good-looking man, and Richard stood for a moment after he had passed out of sight.

“What have I seen in this cursed place?” he murmured. “Ghosts of myself—the good boy content to go out to tea with papa and mamma ; the egotistical young fool full of a dance, and a silly song sung to his ruin ; and here, the last chapter, in the toils of the drink fiend. Now for the grand finale. Who cares ?”

He went on up the road without any object, merely because the police were in the town behind him, and presently determined to seek shelter for the night in some arbor or outhouse. Without remembering which house Amy had entered, he happened to choose its garden, and finding the door of the Japanese house unlocked, he went in there. There was the influence of a late moon, though the night was rainy, enough to enable eyes used to darkness to discern the interior was comfortably furnished. A great roll of matting put away in a corner made him a by no means uneasy bed, and he slept undisturbed for hours. There was a glimmer of dawn when he awoke, which made him anxious to get away unseen. As he looked back from the door at his night's quarters, he saw to his great satisfaction a big, long coat hanging on the wall, and on a shelf a tin of biscuits—remnants of some feast held by Harold and his friends. To possess himself of the coat, and to fill his pockets with the biscuits, was the work of but two or three minutes ; and then he slunk through the bushes, and out over the fields at the back, where he readjusted his red beard before again entering the town. The warmth of the great coat, the night's rest, and the meal he made of the biscuits, renewed his spirits. His ideas began

to form again, and his plans to take shape, with the bodily refreshment.

Great Street formed almost the centre of the town ; it was narrow, but of aristocratic seclusion and inhabitants ; the best houses stood in its limits—large, substantial, stone-faced, red-brick mansions of bygone style—but infinitely preferable to the more showy erections of to-day ; and though it was so close to the busy main street of commerce, it was generally as quiet and dignified as a cathedral close. It was not a thoroughfare, so its noisy cobble pavement was not often an annoyance to those who lived there, and of all the houses, that which had been so long the residence of the principal doctor of the town and neighborhood was the best. It stood alone, with its stables and coachhouse on one side and its garden in the rear, a long town garden, with a few tall black trees in it, where the rooks still lived, regardless of the noisy streets around. It was still almost dark when Richard again entered the street ; not a soul appeared to be stirring, most of the blinds were down, and through some of the windows candlelight shone. He slunk under the archway and watched in vain for further signs of activity ; then he crossed the street and tried the gate leading into the stable yard. To his surprise, it was unlocked. He slipped in, and found all tenantless ; a heap of wood filled the carriage house, the stables were empty, and had evidently been long unused. No windows overlooked it ; the tall blank house-wall was unpierced, and he took his time in making his observations. A door led from the yard into the garden ; but the kitchen premises were there, and he dreaded being seen, should he pass through. However, as after cautiously opening it and listening long, he found the servants were evidently still upstairs, he glided through. The kitchen windows were still covered, and he passed unperceived along the wall, among the thick evergreens, till he gained a little plank house, painted black, where he and his brother had formerly kept pets. He had rightly supposed he should find this empty. It stood in a far corner of the high-walled garden, and he could tell from the long unswept walk leading to it, and from the untrimmed shrubs directly round it, that it had remained long unused and unsought. The wing inhabited by his great-aunt screened the kitchens and the kitchen yard which enclosed the out-offices, and also prevented him seeing the other lower windows, and he laughed to himself as he pictured her horror could she have known whose eyes were scrutinizing her quarters. Her windows were unblinded—she liked

to see the stars when she awoke in the night ; and presently he saw her come to the window in a flannel dressing gown, and look out, her lips moving all the time as if she was making remarks on the weather to Smith.

He remained unmolested and unthought of through the long dragging hours of daylight, listening to the sounds on the other side the wall where a narrow street ran, to an occasional caw from the tops of the trees above him, to faint sounds of crockery in the kitchen, and to the drip, drip of the sodden stark branches above him. As the hours struck from the churches, he imagined the doings in the house. How short and yet how long the years seemed since he was a boy ! He could almost fancy his father's voice hastening the coachman ; he half expected to see his own wraith beside him in the little shed attending to phantom pets. He grew restless for the dark, that he might move about ; for though the day was mild for the season, yet the unused place was damp and chill, and he again felt hungry. When the dark at last fell on everything, and the windows glowed with lamplight, he ventured out and climbed a tree closer to the house, whence he could see right into Miss Jane's bedroom. There she sat in a comfortable chair by a comfortable fire, Smith behind her at work. She wore her dressing gown still, and apparently was not well, and keeping her own room, for the door into her sitting room—the room opening on the stairs—was closed and screened. The sight preached the irony of fate to him. Her rooms had been his and his brother's ; that in which she then was sitting in warmth and brightness and comfort had been his—he had chosen it because he could climb in and out at night without being supposed to be out or late in coming home. And now he was the pariah, glad to shelter in a barn, not daring to approach near home ; a skulking alien in the place which, "by right," was his as the eldest son. His thoughts were bitter enough, but they were not self-accusing ; he called the result of his evil life "bad luck." Everyone with whom he had had to do was to blame ; only himself was blameless. From his high position he could look over the yard wall into the kitchen, with its garnishing of brightly polished covers and pans. What a paradise it appeared to him ! He watched the cook fill the copper kettle and another maid carry it away—for the drawing-room tea, no doubt. Then the table was covered with what seemed to the hungry watcher delicacies innumerable. Presently Smith disappeared from her post in the upper room and returned

with the old lady's tea ; there was the silver tray, with the little old silver teapot, sugar basin, and cream jug he so well remembered. Smith put it down beside her old mistress, placed all within her reach, and left her, to reappear very soon and take her seat at the bounteously spread table in the kitchen with the two other servants.

Richard's eyes flashed. He was looking at his unguarded great-aunt again. As soon as Smith left her, she had got nimbly up and locked the door behind the screen leading to the outer room ; next she pulled a handful of rings from her pocket, and placed one on each finger as far her knotted joints would allow them to go, moving her old hands to and fro in the lamplight to watch the bright stones glitter. Tired of this, she then opened a drawer in the old-fashioned brass-mounted chest, which he knew so well of old, and showed a pile of golden coins ; these she counted and placed in little bags made of the fingers of large white woollen gloves, and each little sack, after filling it, she tied up with narrow red tape such as lawyers use.

All or any scruples this unscrupulous man might have had fled as he looked on this golden hoard. How easy it would be to climb once more up the knotted, tough stems of the wisteria which covered the end wall and garlanded the window, and loot the feeble old woman of "the spoils she had acquired at his expense." If only his stiffened sinews could once more perform the long unpractised feat ! The window was covered by the tall wall of the garden. The houses in the narrow street were too low to overlook it. Miss Jane hated blinds and curtains, and was perfectly secure from prying eyes, she always said, when Smith would have covered the window.

Her hearing was beginning to fail ; the winter tried her diminishing strength ; she no longer went downstairs ; little by little she submitted to be "coddled," as she called the care bestowed upon her. Days often passed as this had passed, when she did not go further than from her bed to the fireside or the window, when she even preferred to be left alone while Smith was at meals, and ceased to insist on hearing all the family letters and plans. She no longer pretended to be clear about the different relationships—the nephews and great-nephews. "People used to be satisfied with one sort of nephew," she had said. "She supposed she was getting too old for new fashions." She spoke, too, of the old doctor as her father, and could not remember her mother's name.

At first she had been sensible of her weakness, and grieved over it, but latterly she laughed at her mistakes and forgetfulness, which was a happier mood for her, though inexpressibly sad to those who watched the once strong, self-reliant spirit decline.

Her glittering fingers had tied up the last little bag, and in another instant the drawer would have been locked upon the treasure, when a chill wind blowing upon her made her turn toward the window.

In an instant the old bleared eyes brightened up, and the thin, shapeless lips opened ready to utter a cry. Then the face suddenly blanched and stiffened, the hands which had been thrust out as if in self-preservation dropped. Time and terror had overpowered her at last, and Richard's work was easy.

At the same time there was a cosey tea party in the drawing room. Mrs. Vernon was old-fashioned, and always made the afternoon tea herself, liking to see the bright copper kettle really boiling, and to pour out the tea so that each cup should receive its due quota of good tea. To give milk instead of cream was a meanness of which she was incapable, nor was the hot, comfortable tea cake or muffin scrimped of butter. She would have felt degraded had she discovered a muffin served at her table with an oasis of unmelted butter in the middle and the sides left dry. In consequence, an afternoon seldom passed without a friend arriving to share the certain-to-be-good afternoon repast. Mr. Marleon and his girls were with the Vernons this afternoon. They were settled in their own house, and he had accustomed himself to the homely ways of the country town, to the quiet, uneventful, domestic life, to the companionship of schoolmasters, rectors, lawyers, and doctors, as if he had never been the despotic ruler over thousands, the master of countless servants, who flew to do his bidding at his nod.

Great Street was still "home" to the girls, and "Aunt Gerty" and "Aunt Isoline" continued to be their authorities on all the new experiences they had to gain in keeping their new home in order. The father accepted it as home too. He could not go in and out of the younger Mrs. Vernon's without fear of remark, he told himself; but what more natural than that he should be constantly in Great Street to avail himself of the experience of the kind old lady and her daughters, who had been so good to his girls! Now and then there was a sly allusion to these frequent visits in Amy's letters to her husband, of which he took no notice

in return. Mr. Marleon himself was not yet aware why the tea and the muffins were not always first-rate. There was certainly some difference in the cream or the butter *this* afternoon. Yet Mrs. Vernon always presided, whether both her daughters were present or absent.

They had been talking over Amy's fright the evening before, and her very unusual nervousness. Mrs. Vernon was determined Gerty and Isoline should take it in turns to stay with their sister-in-law till the boys came home, she said ; adding, "It is very sad to be a lonely woman."

In the momentary silence a little sigh was audible, instantly drowned by the rattle of Isoline's teaspoon. How long, she was thinking—how much longer—was she to be "a lonely woman"? To-morrow the mail would be in, bringing her another letter ; but how long was she to wait till he himself should come? People said the years flew past with them ; they dragged with her. Her youth seemed centuries ago ; her middle age was almost over ; there was no gray yet in her abundant hair ; but the brightness of youth had entirely gone from her comely face, and she did not see as others saw the sweetness which had come instead, a sweetness born of tender patience and unquenchable hope, not dazzling and glowing as the mere beauty of youth, but infinitely more touching and attractive to those who knew her uncomplaining, useful life. She accepted her hopeless engagement as she accepted her daily work. After all, it was a golden link to a possibly golden future, and at those times, when she was much younger, and other suitors had come forward, when her friends had tried to induce her to break with the lover whose prospects were so poor, she had resented such advice with a strength and firmness hardly consistent with her nature. "Did they suppose she would marry for mere money and position? Indeed, she was not keen about marriage at all ; she preferred a real friend like Mr. Truman—even at a distance—to any rich ordinary husband." So, after a time, no one questioned her choice. Her father had approved of it ; consequently her mother agreed also. Her sister backed her up. William alone disapproved ; but he had toned down as the years went by, and now she was only "Poor Issy ; spoiling her life for nothing !"

Her involuntary sigh remained unnoticed, and she set herself to talk and laugh as if her mother's remark had surely no application for her, when Smith appeared and asked to speak to her for a moment. Isoline passed out of the room, and held the handle of

the drawing-room door close on the other side while she heard what Smith had to say.

She merely laughed to hear "Old Miss Vernon had locked herself in, and wouldn't answer."

"She's looking over her finery," she replied. "I do believe she thinks we should like to get hold of some of her big collars and beaded mittens."

"I knocked several times, Miss Isoline. I couldn't hear a sound, and I couldn't see through the keyhole because of the screen."

"Perhaps she's asleep, and you know she's really getting very deaf. Come along; I'll see what I can do."

But when Isoline had knocked again and again, and still elicited no sign from the silent room, she caught some of Smith's apprehension, and went back to the drawing room.

"Aunt Jane has gone to sleep or something," she said. "Mother, have you another key to her room?"

But there was no other, and Mrs. Vernon became frightened as soon as she understood the situation.

"We might burst the door in," she said; "the lock is rather shaky. Mr. Marleon, I wonder if I may ask you to try?"

Then they feared, should the old lady be merely asleep, that such an assault would alarm her. No one thought of entering by the window. After all, it was decided to force the door if possible, and Mr. Marleon's second rush upon it burst it open.

The Marleon girls stood together on the drawing-room landing. Isoline caught her mother's arm, thoughtful of possible trouble, and begged her to keep back till Smith saw what her aunt was about. Mr. Marleon raised his tall figure, and looked over the screen as Smith entered, then a cry from the maid brought them all into the room.

Miss Vernon sat huddled up in her easy-chair, her untasted tea beside her; the lamp and the fire burnt brightly, the bare branches of the garden trees could be seen tossing to and fro against the pale skyline over the high wall, through the uncovered window; a light cane chair lay overturned between the old lady and the window—a chair which Smith raised and righted with a mere innate sense of order—all else was as usual; there were no keys about, no open drawers. Miss Jane was apparently in a fit, her eyes were wide open and full of pain; she tried to speak without seeming to recognize anyone, and opened her lips fiercely again

and again without uttering a sound; but her hands and arms were powerless.

"Paralysis," Mrs. Vernon whispered, and Mr. Marleon ran off for the doctor, sending the two younger girls home, to be out of the way, as he started. Miss Jane was put to bed, still striving her utmost to make a sound, her eyes still full of horror; she struggled against being undressed, and moved her head constantly toward the door; but when she was placed in bed, and Mrs. Vernon sat by her holding her hand and murmuring soothing words, she ceased to struggle, and became more easy; only once, when her niece left hold, she began vainly trying to speak as if again in deadly fear. Mrs. Vernon took the poor hand again.

"I won't leave you," she said, "not till you wish me to go. We are all here, and Dr. Pritchard is coming; only try and be very quiet, aunty."

The old woman's eyes softened. Perhaps she thought of the love and care this often despised niece had ever shown her—of the forbearance and consideration that had continued through so many years of suspicion and indifference; of the cheery disposition that had lightened dark hours, and the generosity which had never noticed sneers or innuendoes. Good daughter and unfailing friend, this "niece-in-law"—as she had often called her, grudging to admit the close relationship to which her conduct entitled her—had ever been. Some such thoughts, with a vague sense of her own unworthiness, no doubt filled the dying woman's mind as her gaze rested on the kindly face compassionately regarding her.

It seemed to the watchers the doctor would never come. Isoline kept out of sight—her tender heart was easing itself with tears. Urania kept close to her, while Smith, unable to sit still, went softly about the rooms, tidying here and there, and ever returning to the bedside to watch.

The doctor's opinion astonished them. "There was no paralysis," he said. Her condition was caused by some mental disturbance or shock; and though they explained how short a time she had remained alone, how impossible it was that anything could have happened without their knowledge, he persisted in his opinion. "It might have been caused even by mere fancy," he said; "but as the mischief was done by the mind, she might recover sufficiently to explain, though at her age recovery was hardly to be expected. He would send her some soothing draughts—probably she would not be able to swallow them—and would look in again last thing.

Meantime, she was not to be left even for an instant ; nothing more could be done at present."

He told them this in the old lady's sitting room, where a fire had been lighted, and where Isoline and Urania sat together. Mrs. Lancing and Amy arrived before he had gone, and when the story and the doctor's comments upon it had been repeated to them, Amy shuddered, though she said nothing. Could that terrible presence have appeared to the old aunt too ? The four sat together, after Dr. Pritchard had gone, talking in whispers, and every now and then Smith came and reported about the invalid. Mrs. Vernon still sat at the bedside, now and again repeating a comforting verse or text, and the old woman's gaze hardly ever left the kind old face above her. She was like a sick child, content to see and feel its mother.

At eight o'clock a meal was brought in to the sitting room, and Isoline took some food to her mother, insisting she should eat it. The time was between eight and nine when Isoline came back, quiet tears falling down her pitiful face. Then the front door bell rang, and a servant came up presently to say a gentleman was in the dining room who wished to see Miss Isoline.

Yes, she had asked his name, but he took no notice ; he only said again, " Miss Isoline."

Mrs. Lancing reproved the girl. " How often have I told you," she whispered, " to ask for a card ? How do we know but it may be a beggar ? At this time of night, too ! "

The girl excused herself. She was sure he wasn't a beggar ; he was a reverend gentleman, she thought.

" Is he very tall ? " Amy said breathlessly.

Then the sisters suddenly thought of Richard ; but the girl's further description relieved all apprehensions. She described him as " a comfortable looking elderly gentleman, neither tall nor short ; " and Amy took courage.

" Probably someone who has met Dr. Pritchard just now," she said, " and has come to ask after great-aunt." And Isoline dried her eyes, looked in the mirror to see if she was presentable, and went downstairs.

CHAPTER XIX

ISOLINE'S VISITOR

THE dining-room fire had got very low, and only one gas bracket was lighted, so the room was in half shadow when Isoline entered, and the visitor stood in that shadow.

She went in, not shutting the door behind her, and advancing to the stranger, whom she at once regarded as a stranger, and therefore somewhat resented as an intruder, bowed formally and stood waiting to know his business. But he remained silent, looking at her from his shadowed position.

Then she addressed him, not coldly,—she was never uncivil,—but not cordially. As she had reached the door, she had seen his coat, hat, and gloves on the hall table, and had naturally believed a man who could so far make himself at home must be a friend ; therefore, when she saw an unrecognizable visitor, she felt the more disturbed.

"May I ask your business?" she said, not seating herself. "We have illness in the family, and are very much engaged." She glanced toward him as she spoke, with a little alarm at his continued silence. As she looked at him, he stepped forward into the light, and breathlessly uttered her name.

"Isoline!"

The weary waiting was ended, the longing appeased, the meeting for which she had lived through so many dragging years had happened ; once more she heard her lover's voice and saw his outstretched arms. The supreme moment she had so often planned, so often rehearsed, was actually hers; but had come—as supreme moments long dwelt upon ever do come—unexpectedly, and contrary to all plans. She moved toward him as if in a dream ; the ceiling and the carpet seemed to meet and prevent her reaching him ; there was a roaring in her ears, the air was full of sparks. She did not faint, did not once lose the consciousness of his presence ; but she was powerless to act or speak—the joy was greater than she could bear.

He seized her as he saw her wavering, and as his arms held her

she recovered her ability to speak, and let herself be placed in an easy-chair. Then they looked at each other and laughed, though tears were in their eyes; he was kneeling by her side, watching her recovery, and they were both struck by the same thought that he might find it difficult to get up again.

"I'm an old fellow, am I not?" he asked; "not worth waiting for, eh? But you—why, I'd no idea you'd grow into such a 'very fine woman—a very fine woman, indeed.'"

He was quoting a speech in a play they had acted together when he was a junior master in the Grammar School; and, as he expected, she objected to the term.

"Fine woman, indeed!" she said. "I hate fine women, and I am not one—you know I'm not; but I'm a silly one."

And then, to prove her words, she put her arms round his neck, and kissed him softly on brow and eyes and lips.

"There's a smile on the face of the tiger," she murmured, as she stopped kissing him, to look at the change time had made in him. "No wonder I didn't know you, you've grown so——"

"Fat," he added, as she hesitated. "Well now, come, let *me* have a look at you."

"Spectacles!" she cried, as he carefully wiped and adjusted a pair on his nose.

"Spectacles!" he repeated. "Well, I expected to see you wearing goggles and a cap, and leading a pug by a long ribbon."

Then he raised his head and looked at her long, while she blushed her middle-aged face into momentary youth beneath his gaze.

"A little delicate embroidery under those sweet eyes," he said, clasping both her hands to prevent her raising them as a screen against his ardent gaze; "a few lines of care on the forehead—marks against me and my poverty, I fear; but our hearts are still young and warm, my dearest—surely our future will be happier because of our faith and patience. Isoline, tell me, are you glad I have come home again?"

Was she *glad*? She laughed at the question, such sweet rippling laughter that he needed no other answer.

"You ask me no questions?" he added; "you take my presence for granted. Ah, your interest is not deep enough. That's it, isn't it?"

She jumped up, suddenly regardful of the rest of the family.

"Think of my selfishness!" she cried. "Aunt Jane dying perhaps; everyone forgotten!"

As she spoke, she took his hand, and drew him with her upstairs to the little sitting room, presenting herself all smiling and ruddy, hand in hand with her lover before her sisters, Urania, and Mr. Marleon.

But they were not so astonished as she had expected them to be. Mr. Marleon had returned to the house to see what he could do to help, as well as to fetch his daughter, and he had all but broken in on the self-absorbed couple, not knowing a stranger had arrived. Mrs. Lancing found it out first. When, after the first few moments of Isoline's absence, they had all become curious to know who detained her, Gertrude had gone down softly, and peeped in at the only half-closed door. The tone of the familiar voice told her more than the sight of the man that Mr. Truman had at last arrived. She had retreated speedily when she found herself unobserved, and flown up to spread the news, whispering it to her mother as the patient woman still sat at the bedside. It struck them both that the old woman in bed quivered at the words—she certainly made another frantic effort to speak, and it seemed to Mrs. Vernon that the long fingers in her own soft grasp feebly moved. What a relief it was to the mother to know someone had come in this extremity, who was both able and willing to act as a son of the house. Her thoughts at once went off on hospitable plans—a room must be prepared, a good meal must be got ready, and Gerty must tell him at once to come to the door and let her see him.

Gerty was willing enough to see these wishes carried out, only she declared she was not going to break in upon the interview, for they had surely earned a little time to themselves, after all these years of separation. When they did at last appear, and their eyes went to the clock, they were amazed to find that the interval they had had together, apparently of so short a duration, had actually exceeded an hour.

Isoline left Mr. Truman explaining his appearance, while she went gently into the adjoining bedroom. Her mother's eyes kindled as she saw her, and her heart beat with happy excitement. Surely this great joy had come to help them to bear the sorrow which had just preceded it. Isoline put her arm round her mother, and kneeling by her side, let herself be kissed and crooned over. How often the mother's unspoken sympathy had fallen as refreshment on the daughter's wearying heart! How often the kind eyes had made her remember the unceasing watchful love that would

bear her trouble for her if it were but possible ! And now, kneeling by her, Isoline felt a child once more, seeking the unflinching tenderness as she had sought it long ago, in all her childish sorrows and joys. She could bear now to let her mother see how deeply these years of waiting had tried her. When at last she raised her head, the storm of feeling over, her eyes shone with a light that thrilled her mother with rapture. Presently the door was pushed softly open, and the visitor stood just inside, exchanging silent salutations with the watcher by the bed.

Miss Jane lay on high pillows, that she might breathe easily, and as Mr. Truman appeared, she opened her eyes and saw him. Instantly she was seized with violent convulsions. Smith and Mrs. Vernon on either side held her and soothed her ; but she continued to be violently agitated, till, after agonizing, ineffectual efforts, she ejaculated, with a force that directly afterward reduced her to insensibility, the one word "Richard !"

She was unconscious when the doctor arrived, and it was his opinion that she would pass away in that state. Nothing could be done. She might live days, or she might go in a few hours.

When he and the Marleons had gone, the family assembled in the bedroom, and Mr. Truman prayed for the dying. There were no heartrending sobs and tears. Aunt Jane was a part of their lives—as familiar to them as the house and furniture, which were unchanged since their earliest recollections. Mr. Truman himself never remembered any sign of youth about her. Her decided manner and sharp temper had never endeared her to those about her. So it was more the solemnity of death that impressed them than the grief which feels the sunshine is clouded.

"Poor Aunt Jane" was passing into the unknown, they thought of her kindly. She had been a mother to their dearly loved father. She had sometimes done them kindnesses. Her laugh and her sharp speeches, her exacting ways, her insatiable curiosity, her selfish disregard of her elder niece's comfort and tastes, were all forgotten now. She was "poor great-aunt," going out alone to give an account of the work of ninety-seven years. The old body had at last given in. The spirit had almost cast it aside ; the machinery was worn out, and could no more be patched and mended. Very soon there would only remain the empty shell of the chrysalis—all that belonged to Time. The exultant spirit would have *winged its flight*—whither ?

Mr. Truman's concluding words, "And grant, O merciful Lord,

that our dear sister is now hearing thy summons, not as the summons of an angry judge, but as that of a loving father calling his child home," seemed to fall on hearing ears. The old shrunken face, over which the darkness of death was brooding, became bright for a moment, and her ashen lips moved as if she followed the prayer; but all through the night she kept her eyes closed, and when the watchers changed places at her side, one soft, warm hand so quickly replaced another on her fleshless, chilly fingers, that if she was conscious of any difference she made no sign.

No one went to bed. Mrs. Vernon nodded occasionally. Gertrude and her mother and Smith took turns by the bedside. Isoline would have shared their work, but they would not allow her. She was useful in keeping tea and coffee ready in the sitting room, they said. So she and Mr. Truman sat together talking, and she heard the reason of his unexpected return.

The head of the Missionary College in Mixtiphao had resigned. Mr. Truman had been offered the post. It was one of importance, and would enable him to keep a wife in comfort and with as little damage to her health as was possible, and he had posted off home to plead in person that Isoline might be trusted to him. He did not pretend to fear a refusal on the part of Isoline. Aunt Jane's death would remove one tie to home. Isoline's mother and sister would be left together in peace. There was no existing reason why the marriage should be any longer delayed. So, though death was waiting in the next room, the long-parted lovers were happy in each other.

Poor Amy, tired out with the last sleepless night, and the anxiety and suppressed excitement of the long day, lay back in an easy-chair in the bedroom, fast asleep. She had not dared to go home alone, lest there should be a repetition of the apparition, so had contented herself with sending a message. And so the chilly dawn came on, and as it strengthened and a glimmer of light made the lamp look yellow, Miss Jane opened her eyes, and, without an effort, asked for Mr. Truman.

It was the irony of fate, indeed, that she should depend upon the man she had so often sneered at as "that poor creature—Isoline's bad bargain"—to ease her parting soul at the last.

She let him pray with her, and as he prayed a few tears fell from her deep-set eyes. But when he rose she laughed, and, with a *stronger* voice than usual, remarked she was making "quite an *edifying* end." She asked for Isoline; and as they stood together

she smiled and nodded at them, saying, "The death bell first, then the wedding peal."

She was so much better that they were able to leave her by turns, and the workday began pretty much as usual. Amy went home for an hour or two, and Mr. Truman went off to telegraph to George to come and act in his father's absence.

On his return he found a cheerful breakfast room, and the daughters of the house refreshed by their morning toilet, ready to welcome him anew. It was impossible for them to be very solemn. Gertrude was happy for Isoline, and Isoline and her lover were in bliss; but they had hardly finished breakfast when Smith came in, and, shutting the door behind her, changed the harmony of their mood into discord.

"I can't tell your ma," she said. "And for once in her life Miss Jane wishes to keep it from her as long as possible. Mr. Truman, you know all about Mr. Richard. I'm not telling family secrets you don't know of, sir."

The sisters sat up in sudden terror. Was Richard here again? was the silent question in both minds.

"You heard Miss Jane call out on Mr. Richard?" she added. "Well, when your ma went away to her bath a while ago, Miss Jane, she beckoned me close, and she says, as sensibly as I'm speaking now, 'Smith,' says she, 'you look in the little right-hand drawer there, and tell me what you see.'"

"She kept her money in that drawer, and I'd never seen its inside, for she always kept it locked and the key hid away, and I never saw her go to it. I expect she used to open it when I was downstairs at meals.

"So I asked her where I'd find the key, and she said perhaps it were unlocked. And so it was; and I told her there was nothing in it but her bankbook and her checkbook and a packet of old letters. So she didn't take on; but she says, 'Then it weren't a dream.' And she told me she had fifty pounds in that drawer, done up by tens of golden sovereigns in old glove fingers, and then she says, 'Look in my pocket, and see for my rings.' But her pocket was empty, and then she got frightened like, and she pulled me down till my ear was close to her mouth, and she says, 'Mr. Richard came in by the window last night, when you were at tea, and he's taken the money and the rings.' You could have knocked me down with a feather!"

"*Her mind is wandering,*" Gertrude cried.

"No, Miss Gertrude—I mean Mrs. Lancing—she's clear enough about the robbery, though whether it was Mr. Richard one can't tell. But he knows the way in at the window well enough. No wonder the poor old lady was frightened into a fit. I'm only thankful he wasn't violent to her. She says she was looking at her money when he came in, and then she remembers no more. As your ma came back, I slipped out and into the garden, and there, sure enough, a man has climbed up the wisteria. There are his footsteps on the mould, and bits of twigs scattered about, and one of the rings has been dropped, and here it is." And she showed them an old-fashioned cornelian hoop ring. "He knew he'd get little enough on it, so he threw it away, no doubt."

They were eager to go out and see for themselves, but Smith reminded them of the expediency of keeping the matter close.

"He's gone far enough by this time. Let him go," she said ; "and his disgrace go with him."

"Gertrude," cried Isoline, "can poor Amy have seen *him* that night?"

"And she would not tell us ! Poor dear Amy !" Mrs. Lancing cried ; "no wonder she was upset."

It was agreed that the matter must be hushed up for the sake of the family, their hope being, as Smith suggested, that Richard would certainly get and keep as far away as was possible. It was decided Mr. Truman should go out into the garden with his pipe, and restore order to the trampled down flower-bed, unostentatiously, before the servants were likely to be about there. And the story was to be kept from the mother at present ; only the sooner Amy was told the better, that she might lose her probable dread of his return.

Amy was back before the morning was half over—wan and sad and fearful. But when she heard the story relief was immediate, and while she blamed herself for her miserable superstition, a weight of agony was lifted from her.

"Of course it must have been Richard," she cried, "and my scream prevented him speaking and explaining. If I had only been sensible, you would have been warned, and poor old Aunt Jane would have escaped. How could I be so senseless !"

With his pipe in his mouth Mr. Truman perambulated the garden, easily tracing—while to all appearance occupied only with *his pipe*—Richard's movements among the damp earth and grass to *and from the shed* ; while from a shred of cloth on the rough bark

of the tree he guessed how he had overlooked the room. It was easy to see how he had climbed to the window. Smith had the honor of the family too much at heart to repeat her suspicions to her fellow-servants, and they considered there was nothing more natural than that the old lady should have a seizure. That a tragedy could happen without their knowledge was beyond conception. "Miss Isoline's gentleman was fond of gardening, no doubt," they argued, and they were glad to hear the cheerful sound of his rake as he cleared the dead leaves neatly off the mouldy paths, and raked away the dead stems of the chrysanthemums. The honor of the family was, of course, to him also as his own; and he declared an untidy garden to be an offence. "They should see what a good gardener he was before he had done with it," he said. The maid waiting at luncheon repeated his words in the kitchen, and commended them. And by and by, when she stole out to see the effect of his endeavors, there was no trace of clumsy footsteps or torn creepers. If Miss Vernon went out of the world without betraying her great-nephew, no one else was likely to cast the first stone. But as soon as the dusk fell ever after, one or other of the family put the chain on the front door and turned the key in the lock. Richard was hardly likely to return; but the fear of such a thing was beyond reason.

Miss Jane did leave the world without making any further statement than what she had told her faithful maid in confidence. Her faculties revived and remained strong to the last. She was pleased to see George, and told him to give her love to his brothers, and bid them to be good sons. She once or twice told old Mrs. Vernon that she'd done her duty, and turned out much better than could have been expected, and Mrs. Vernon accepted the questionable praise as it was meant, and wept over the death of her lifelong incubus.

Just before she died, when they were all in the room, she suddenly threw off the stupor which had possessed her for hours, and told them Lawyer Fenley had her will. "I should like to see how you'll take it," she added, and she laughed as if her thoughts on the subject were amusing. Once more she dozed and once more roused up to exclaim, with wonderful vigor, "Now, mind, no flowers; none of that sickly nonsense and humbug," and then she had done with Time, and passed into Eternity.

Her will did astonish them. She died possessed of nearly four thousand pounds, and it was left to Isoline, "for her sole use and

maintenance"—a cut at Isoline's bad bargain, which only made Mr. Truman smile. Aunt Jane had never ceased to ridicule the engagement, and traduce Mr. Truman. She had called her great-niece "a softy," "a poor thing," and "a soured woman"; yet all the while she was saving and investing her means, carefully and prudently, for the benefit of the couple she professed to despise. And what a windfall it was to Isoline!

CHAPTER XX

FROM GRAVE TO GAY

IN Christmas week Miss Jane Vernon was taken from the home of nearly sixty years, and put to rest in the cemetery with her nephew and his first wife. And then the mourners, saddened with kindly but not overpowering sorrow, went their several ways.

Old Mrs. Vernon and Smith felt their occupation gone; but the younger generation soon ceased to whisper and talk of "poor great-aunt." The horror of Richard's last visit began to fade; the bustle created by the home-coming of Mr. Truman and of George and Dalrymple all had good effect, and when the New Year came in and life once more assumed its due proportions, Mr. Truman began to be urgent that Isoline's preparations for her new state should at once be put in hand. He had only three months' leave—one to come, one to stay, and one to return; ten days of that precious month at home had already gone, and he had yet many visits to pay and many purchases to make. Isoline must return with him, or he must give up the work for which he was so fitted. With a man's impatience of "dress," he declared Isoline needed nothing but a "bale or two of light stuff," which her own tailor could make up at Mixtiphao. Shoes, he allowed, were best taken out; but for everything else a missionary's wife needed nothing better than the country supplied. He brought out a long list of comforts he had made, and only waited to order when he was sure of his wife, which showed him to be thoughtful enough and ready enough to consider her properly.

Isoline laughed at one item, and had it promptly erased. It was a looking glass sufficiently long to reflect her from head to foot. He was very much surprised at this. A brother missionary, who

had travelled home with him on the same errand as himself, had drawn up a similar list with him, and had insisted that a large mirror was considered indispensable by every woman.

"But then," as Mr. Truman told Gertrude confidentially, "Isoline was always superior to the rest of her sex."

Just three weeks after his arrival Isoline, dressed in sober gray, stood by his side in an unfashionable church in an unfashionable part of London, while an old college friend of the bridegroom made them man and wife.

All sign of mourning was put out of sight for the day. Mrs. Lancing and her mother shed a few tears behind the bride; but Amy and her four boys, the three Marleon girls as bridesmaids, in bright spring attire, and Mr. Marleon and a few relations, made a sufficiently wedding-like appearance to give the ceremony the necessary festive character, and at the wedding feast, which was held in a hotel sufficiently aristocratic to gratify Dalrymple's ideas of what was fitting, the jollity of the young people prevented any unseemly regret obtruding itself among the elders.

The newly married couple remained in London to complete their shopping, and all the others went back in the gloaming to Cotley, and it was while in the train that George and Urania were able to exchange their first words out of earshot of anyone else. She sat close to the window, and the two little boys occupied the opposite seat. George sat beside her, and, by merely turning his broad shoulders, he interposed a very efficient screen between themselves and the rest of the party. Dalrymple sat beside his little brothers, and he and Constantia were engrossed in themselves—the flirtation between them ebbed and flowed according to circumstances.

When he came home, he took up the interrupted thread without hesitation, and she was quite ready to meet him half-way generally. Sometimes there was a rival in the way, whom she played off against him; but that was only in his long leave, when his attentions were apt to become monotonous, and misunderstanding gave a flavor of relief, and led to exciting explanations, forgiveness, and a present of sweets to cement the renewed truce. On his short visits of a few days she was all fun and friendship, and though she teased him, yet he was very pleasantly aware that her eyes sparkled and her smiles broadened, when he was with her, as for no other "man," as he called himself.

Urania and George had met daily since George's recall, but nothing of what had passed between them during his former stay at

home had taken words ; they had always been surrounded by others, and though he knew her eyes deepened as they met his, and she knew his hand held hers in greeting differently to the usual mere friendly grasp, and that he watched her every movement, yet hitherto no word but what might have been proclaimed upon the housetops had passed between them. Now, in the crowded railway carriage, they seemed screened in, and out of others' hearing.

Harold unconsciously gave the cue.

"Ranny, dear," he said, "would you like to be married like Aunt Issy? I wonder who you'll marry?"

George could not see her crimsoning face, but he heard the confusion in her voice as she gave a little giggle—and she had long since ceased to giggle.

"You go to sleep and be quiet," George said. "There's Toby gone off already ; let his head rest on your arm, and see he doesn't slip ; or, what would be best, let him lie all along in your place, and you go to the other end ; mother will find room."

So observant Harold was moved off, and little Arthur lay coseily opposite while George plunged into the subject nearest his heart.

"I wonder how Aunt Issy will like being a missionary's wife?" he said. "Though I suppose, as she will be with him, she won't mind anything else. It's very plucky of her, going out there at her age."

"No one can call *her* old," Urania said. "But I never thought Mr. Truman would be like *that*."

"Like what? He's the best fellow that ever lived."

"Oh, yes ; but he's so fat and so bald, and Aunt Issy is so sweet and so nice and so—so different——"

"What does it matter what a fellow's like?" cried George. "Look what good he does ; think of his self-denial and his faith ; he's a regular apostle ! Aunt Issy ought to be thankful to get such a husband ; besides, he wasn't fat and bald when they were first engaged. Do you mean to say your affection would only last as long as—as its object was young and nice looking?"

She murmured something he did not catch ; his protest had made her rather ashamed.

"What?" he asked, bending closer over her.

The moment's impulse to excuse her foolish remark fled.

"*I'm like the parrot, 'Sorry I spoke,'*" she said lightly.

He drew back, and for a few seconds was silent. Then he

blurted out the confession he had so long waited to make, and had meant to make in such a different spirit.

"I am going to be a missionary, but not to such a civilized part of the world as Burmah. It is just as well I should be warned in time not to expect any girl to care for me if the climate spoils my complexion."

"You a missionary!" she exclaimed. "But what will they all say at home? You, with your prospects and your talents. You are joking!"

"What has set you against missionaries? I remember you have often talked of Uncle Truman and Doughty with admiration and respect. Are you so weak as to turn against the lot just because one of them is fat and bald?"

"No, no, George, I am not so silly as all that; only——"

"Only what?"

She could not tell him that, girl-like, she had pictured Isoline's faithful lover so different to the reality that she had taken offence because of the disappointment of her own imagining. His letters had charmed her; Isoline's description of his character had made her fancy him a very hero; and then, when the reality was before her, "the comfortable elderly gentleman," with his young, lively manner; when she saw him pay Isoline the loverlike attention a much younger man would refrain from paying before others; when she watched his broad face beam openly when Isoline appeared; when he addressed her in public as "darling," and sat beside her with her hand in his as a matter of course, she could make no allowances, see no excuses. Isoline was still as high as ever in Urania's estimation; but Isoline's husband! There was revolt in the young girl's sensitive mind; wrong where all had seemed so right. How could Isoline give up her home, her comforts, her relations, nay, her friends, for this ordinary old clergyman, who would persist in living among uncomfortable people in a far-off country?

So when George repeated his question, "Only what?" she said merely, "I am so surprised."

"Didn't you think me capable of any self-denial?" he asked.

She was incapable of thought. She seemed to have had a series of blows where she had looked for successes. Everything seemed slipping away from her. She had clung to Isoline as to a lifelong prop. She had pictured George's career leading from height to height. *Everything was wrong.* She could have cried in her

dismay; but she was not given to tears. For many a year afterward the sound of the train rushing through the half-light recalled her stunned feelings. Isoline gone, George going, and she unable to see another guide, another friend quite like either!

"Must your self-denial be exercised only in this particular line?" she said at last; and her voice was hoarse as she spoke.

"A great deal has happened to me at college," he said. "I see things now very differently. I have found real friends and a real vocation. I have not decided in mere enthusiasm or excitement. I believe I have chosen right. I *know* now I have chosen right, because I can be firm even against your evident disapproval; but is worldly distinction everything to you?"

"As if I cared for worldly distinction!" she cried. "But what will your mother do without you?"

A little smile stole over his face. "I am not the only one to my mother," he rejoined. "I think she will bid me act according to my conscience. *She* will give me credit for sincerity, at all events."

"Don't you think I am capable of crediting you with acting rightly?" she asked, answering the inference in his words unconsciously.

He went on hurriedly. "I shall be two years in a training college before I am ordained; then I shall go out to South Africa probably, Australia possibly. This is my programme—of course liable to alterations, as circumstances open out."

The "two years" came as a reprieve. She laughed lightly.

"Two years hence!" she cried. "Oh, boys of your age change their minds dozens of times. We needn't think of 'good-by,' then, for many a long day."

"I thought I was talking to a friend," he said slowly. "I don't wish to bore; pray forgive me."

She was vexed with him, but more vexed with herself. They were rapidly nearing Cotley, and the misunderstanding got deeper. She suddenly changed her manner.

"You are fishing for compliments!" she cried. "A true friend never flatters, and true friends never quarrel; and who are these new acquaintances who make you forget your relations, and everyone—I mean everything—else?"

He answered her eagerly. "I will tell you all about everything, *if you care to hear*, and if you—you won't speak so sharply, *Urania*. I haven't mentioned a word to anyone yet; but I shall

tell mother to-night." And then, as shortly as possible, he told her of his new convictions, his new aims, and the work he had begun.

He spoke so simply and convincingly that the girl caught some of his earnestness, and softened toward him. His words called back the enthusiasm with which she had regarded Mr. Doughty's schemes, and which had placed a halo round Mr. Truman's bald head. Her eyes softened as she looked at him, and her sympathy flowed out as she listened. She had called him, mockingly, a changeable boy, though he was three years her senior ; but he was proving himself a thoughtful man, full of self-denying plans. What right had she, whose heart convinced her of her great inferiority, to put a stumbling block in his way ? Yet there was a soreness that he could so easily map out his career, leaving her out of it altogether, and George, with all his ability, could not see this. He took it for granted she would understand. He dare not say all he could say with the example of his aunt and Mr. Truman before him.

The train reached Cotley all too soon. Their eyes had met kindly, her tone was soft and cordial as she said "Good-night"; but no words of renewed amity had passed between them, though both felt on their old footing again. Young Mrs. Vernon drove off with her sons, and the Marleon girls sat in their carriage, waiting till their father saw old Mrs. Vernon and her daughter into a fly. The sisters' tongues were loosened about the marriage, and they were unanimous that the bridegroom was much too old, and that none of them (the sisters) would ever marry at all, unless their husbands were under twenty-five.

"Mr. Truman is an old dear," said Constantia. "But it's silly, isn't it, for anyone to get married with gray hair ? Why, he's as old as you, papa. Fancy you getting married !"

"What nonsense you talk !" came from the dark corner, where Mr. Marleon leaned back.

His girls had long ceased to dread him, since he had ceased to regard them as encumbrances. He had always been the kinder parent of the two, and since they had lived together at Cotley, he and they had forgotten there had ever been a time that they were not on the happiest terms together. With Mrs. Lancing as adviser in chief, Urania had proved a skilful housekeeper ; and he had more and more associated himself with their pursuits, and encouraged them in their studies, till they considered him quite as one of

themselves, and would repeat sweet speeches addressed to them by their partners, and tell him freely all their doings. "Such a happy home," everyone said. "He'll never marry again till those girls are off his hands, and then very likely he'll get Gertrude Lancing to have him." But that he would ever marry again had never yet entered his young daughters' heads; though, as he spoke now, something in his manner struck Urania unpleasantly.

Constantia laughed at his remark, while Titania added, "That if papa was old, which she doubted, he was neither fat nor bald."

When they were all at home, and the girls stood waiting for the good-night kiss, he shut the dining-room door, and coughed rather nervously.

"I am very tired of playing chaperon," he said, standing before them with his hands in his pockets.

"Oh, poor papa!" Urania cried. "We won't go out so often, then."

"Aunt Gertrude would take us," Titania added.

His head had drooped when Urania spoke, but at Titania's remark he looked up, and smiled as if relieved. "You like Aunt Gertrude immensely," he said.

The two younger girls cried, "Oh, yes!" emphatically, but Urania's heart beat rapidly. A sudden conviction came to her; she could not speak a word. She watched her father's lips, and guessed their utterance before they moved.

"I am going to be a silly old fellow," he said, after an instant's pause. "I know you love Mrs. Lancing dearly."

Urania had filled up the hiatus, but her sisters did not understand him.

"Well; but, papa, dear?" Constantia asked. "What do you mean? what are you going to do? not——"

She stopped short; inspiration enlightened her, too. She looked round at her sisters. Urania's eyes remained fixed on her father. Titania was simply puzzled; she yawned behind her hand; she was too tired to use her wits.

Mr. Marleon drew himself up. He had three daughters, two of them grown up; but he knew he was a young looking man, of a good figure and dignified presence. He had not reigned as a little king for so many years without acquiring a certain presence which marked him as a person of standing and position. There was nothing old-fashioned in either his manner or his habits, and no one would venture to be familiar with him without very de-

cided encouragement. So as he drew himself up, preparatory to making his confession, he reflected. Excuses would be unbecoming ; he was about to commit no unkindness, and his children must get over what little vexation they might feel. He was not going to impose a stranger, or a vixen, upon them, but a tried friend. There was no need for him to treat them as his judges, so he said :

"You have managed very well for me, girls, since we have set up house together ; but we are, naturally, of different generations. I am an old foggy to you, no doubt, and you are to me 'My dear little girls.'"

He smiled round, and there was a slight tremble in his voice. Urania was softened at once. Clearly before her came the memory of his misery when her mother died. Clearly now she understood how daughters, however dear, cannot be quite the same as the tried companion with the like memories, the like associations, the experience gained together, the joys and sorrows shared in common ; they could be only "the dear little girls," and that they were dear to him her heart generously acknowledged. She stepped to his side and clasped his arm.

"Papa !" she cried. "We are all glad for you. We will be glad for ourselves, too."

Constantia followed, and clasped his other arm, smiling up at him, as if to endorse her sister's words ; but Titania remained aloof, quite unconscious of the truth.

"What are you about ?" she asked. "What is it, papa ?"

He stretched out his hand, and drew her close.

"Ranny guessed," he said. "You are not often so slow, Tanny. Mrs. Lancing is going to be my wife. I knew she would be good to you."

And Titania's remark was :

"A stepmother !"—with a blank look of dismay. But almost before she had uttered the words, she repented of them, adding quickly, "No ; Aunt Gertrude isn't like anyone else. It will be jolly having her always. And only think, how funny ! Why, those boys will be our brothers, or cousins, or something. Won't it be queer ?"

Mr. Marleon laughed. He had got through an awkward explanation happily. He had secured his children's happiness as well as his own, he told himself.

He stood on the hearthrug long after they had gone to bed, think-

ing of the new life opening before him, of the old life closed behind him, and of the girl-wife who had gradually hardened into the priggish and somewhat complaining woman. He was glad to remember he had given her everything she desired, and been patient and tender to her in her weakness. Had not her ill-health soured her naturally good temper? Had she not at the last been brave and patient and loving? Poor Bella! Twenty-five years ago he had a jovial wedding out in Bombay. He had scattered his pay freely, and his father-in-law, who held a prominent position in the law court there, had made the presidency ring with his widespread hospitality. He was then twenty-four—his bride just twenty. He remembered with some shame how lightly he had thought of the responsibilities of marriage, how almost altogether it had been a mere occasion for expenditure and amusement, and how he and she had lived for themselves. He pictured the disappointment of the closing years—the children considered encumbrances, the restless, dissatisfied period before his wife died. He was close upon fifty now, yet once more the future looked bright. Youth and middle age were over, yet again his pulses tingled and his heart beat with renewed hope. In his first grief and dismay Gertrude had taught his girls to comfort him, and with her cheerful, orderly presence had dispersed half the gloom of the dark, untidy house. He could see her so well, as he stood looking back into that sad time—not appearing to watch him, yet ready with anything he might want. He knew even then that her soft, kindly voice gave him unspoken sympathy, by its very tone, and it had comforted him to remember she had passed through a like sorrow, and had come out of it refined and cheerful. He remembered, too, the pang he had felt when his girls clung to her in terror of their dead mother. Surely, surely, he was doing right in giving her a legal interest in them. He was honest, too. He smiled as he thought how two or three months ago she had rejected him, declaring she could never marry again, never give up bearing the name of her dead husband. The mere thought had annoyed her, and she had all but told him his proposal was an impertinence. He liked a woman of spirit. Her determined ways were attractions to him, so he had left her seemingly convinced, but had not discontinued his constant visits nor ceased to let her see he was like Barkis—"still willing." Then the aunt's illness and death, and the family horror at the share Richard *had had in* it had come, and he had been treated as a real friend, *and permitted to share their sorrow and their attendant joy.*

Gertrude had softened toward him when her sister's marriage and departure were decided. Perhaps she could not face the lonely life with her mother in the once full house. Perhaps she recognized the value of the suitor's persistent court, or perhaps Isoline's happiness had made her yearn for the like. Her consent was characteristically given. That very day, when they were all waiting for the train in London, they two had found themselves a little apart from all the rest, and he, seeing her eyes were full of tears, had impulsively put out his hand as if to offer her comfort. As impulsively she had put out hers, and in the mutual grasp they plighted their troth. A few whispered words had sealed the agreement, and he knew she was as certainly his as if each had signed the marriage register. He was honest, as he admitted she had taken the regret out of his life, and that a better feeling possessed him now that in his silver age he was again contemplating matrimony; a truer and deeper sense of true union than he had had in that first marriage, which had brought him sorrow and disappointment. This surely would give him comfort and satisfaction. "Man never is, but always to be, blessed."

CHAPTER XXI

OUT IN CAMP

It was the morning after Isoline's wedding—the eighteenth birthday of Dalrymple Vernon. Birthdays were celebrated as great occasions in the Vernon family, and every relation within hail duly contributed a congratulatory present.

Dalrymple came smiling into the dining room—the first down, after his mother—and his eyes glistened at the sight of a small mountain of packets round his plate, though he went straight up to her to give and receive a morning salutation.

Amy never preached, and so a solemn word rarely spoken always struck home.

"One year nearer manhood, darling," she said, kissing him fondly. "I hope you are daily strengthening your armor to meet all its temptations."

Then he seated himself while she stood over him, one hand on his shoulder, watching his pleasure.

There was first that never-failing gift from the absent father—or at least provided in his name. The recipient was not particular which parent chose it, as long as it was there. Then the mother's, which was, as a matter of course. "The very thing I wanted!" Toby had prepared a stick of sealing-wax, wrapped in many papers, to make bulk. He could imagine no greater treasure, and the pot-hook inscription had cost him great mental labor. Harold soared higher. His gift was a smart cane, such as Tommy Atkins fancies. George's present was a book. "Just like old George," his brother said, tossing it aside to draw a jar to him; a jar tied up with bright ribbons—his old school colors—which he rightly guessed to be the work of Constantia.

It was not a sentimental offering, and Amy cried out with scorn as it was uncovered, and found to be—"Pickles!"

"The nicest thing she could give me!" he exclaimed. "A sensible, delicious idea! Won't the fellows envy me! Yes, mother, of course I shall take it back with me. They are stingy with pickles there; and this lot will last me ever so long."

He was so delighted with his pickles that he opened the jar and smelt its contents, and only at his mother's earnest desire refrained from eating some. No other of his many gifts afforded him half so much delight, and even when Aunt Gertrude arrived—just as breakfast was over—bringing her own and her mother's handsome offering, his eyes returned again and again to the fascinating beribboned jar.

Aunt Gertrude sat down by the hearth; the little boys went off to have their boots on. She turned round to the rest, as soon as the door was shut, and said abruptly:

"I have come to say I'm going to marry Mr. Marleon."

She looked anxious as she spoke, as if anticipating a clamor of disapprobation.

"Well," cried her sister-in-law; "I'm so glad. And so will William be glad. He's a good creature. And you, dear Gertrude, you will, I know, be happy."

Then Gertrude's face flushed, and smiles came.

"But are you not astonished?" she asked.

George and Dalrymple were, if their mother was not. It was to them most extraordinary that two people of their Aunt Gertrude's and Mr. Marleon's time of life could not be content to be friendly neighbors without being so silly as to get married and make people talk.

"You are jesting!" George said.

"I was never more serious in all my life," she returned. "We are two silly old things. Yes, Master Dal, I can read it in your face. But it's true. Isoline and Truman set the bad example, and now we are going to follow it."

George recovered himself quickly, and said what was proper on the occasion; but Dalrymple did not get beyond, "Oh, I say, Aunt Gerty!" Then—"The girls won't be our sisters, will they? only sort of Scotch cousins, eh?"

Aunt Gertrude had said her say and rose to go. Mr. Marleon was to bring his daughters to congratulate her at twelve. She must be back in good time.

"This is the only thing I dread," she told Amy, as they walked together to the garden gate. "I don't think they will object; but they might. You are sure *you* approve?"

Amy astonished her by saying she had expected it ever since Mr. Marleon had decided to live at Cotley, and had even told her husband to expect it.

Gertrude said truly in declaring it had been a great surprise to herself.

Mrs. Vernon bade her go and put on her new black gown. "Remember," she added, "women are only as old as they look, and you owe it to him to make the best of yourself."

"Amy," she cried, as she started off, "I never thought you were worldly wise before."

A funeral and a wedding happening so close together was rather confusing to mourners who really missed the dead. And now this new engagement made the bewilderment greater. But when the bride and bridegroom had been home to say good-by, and all the big packages had gone too, leaving that sad spectacle—deserted rooms littered with discarded things—the sense of bereavement triumphed, and old Mrs. Vernon's habitual cheerfulness deserted her. The house was full of silent voices and vanished forms. She became nervous and fanciful; and although she had been told of Richard's visit, and therefore felt convinced he was not likely to show himself ever again in Cotley, yet, as the dusk came on every evening, she started at every footstep, and feared every ring at the door.

It was then Mr. Marleon assumed his right to counsel and console, and *suggested they should all go away to Italy, "to meet the spring."*

The idea was like opening a door into fairyland. The girls would be benefited by foreign travel; they would have Gertrude's prudent companionship, and Gertrude would have her mother's. There never was a more delightful scheme. On their return, Mrs. Lancing could have a wedding in her native place without violating the decency due to the old aunt's memory, and old Mrs. Vernon could return to a new dwelling either with her son's wife, or a small house of her own, with Smith as major-domo.

George and Dalrymple were the only ones who objected, though George saw in it a signal interposition to divide him from Urania and temptation. He told his mother of his new views in regard to his work; and, as he expected, she was at first distressed and then proud that she had a child willing to renounce the good things of this life to work for God among the heathen.

She argued with him and reasoned to make sure he was not swayed by enthusiasm only, before she gave her consent.

"I always thought mother was the best mother on earth," George said, writing it all out to Fabian; "but I had no idea she had such a clear headpiece before. Now she's on my side, I know she'll get father's consent too."

He and Urania were never alone again, till the day of the departure for Italy. Then her words showed she had been thinking of what he had said that evening. They were:

"When do you begin your special training? Shall you take holidays as usual, or remain away from home altogether?"

"I don't propose to enter a monastery," he replied. "Of course I shall come home as usual."

She met his eyes while her own were laughing at his remark. Then she said:

"By the time we are back again, I expect to hear you've changed your mind."

"Only fools stick to their own opinions in spite of reason," he rejoined; "but on some matters there can be no change possible. This is a case 'that altereth not.'"

"If you were offered a college living?" she asked.

He shook his head.

"Do you really mean to go and pig among those dreadful creatures till you die?"

"No; I'm not quite idiotic, and I hope I shall keep myself and my surroundings clean. I hope to come home, when my strength proves unequal to the climate. If I find the climate won't let me

be well enough to be of use, why, of course, I should recognize the fact, and try to see where is the next best place."

"Then I hope," she cried joyously, "your health will——" She stopped short, and blushed deeply. George's heart beat fast; it was impossible for him not to feel the full inference of her half words and sudden break off; he had but to say what he so ardently wished to say, and she would be his; but with the temptation came the recollection of his Aunt Isoline's lifelong waiting. Could he ask Urania to wait and wither? Was Urania's the temperament that sorrow sanctifies and sweetens? Isoline's engagement, too, was made when Mr. Truman had no idea of turning missionary; it was altogether different. Only for one moment did the scale hang on the balance, before George recovered his sober senses. Someone called "Ranny," and he was spared further trial. In another instant she had obeyed the peremptory summons, and he was left trembling with the sharpness of the struggle.

The brothers took his decision characteristically. Will wished *he* were so good at self-sacrifice; Fabian thought it was a cheap way for a fellow who loved adventures to see the world, and Dalrymple declared old George would have much more of a lark "out there" than sticking in the mud of an English curacy; while Harold gave it as his belief George wanted to add to his collections and at once put in his claim for duplicates and "a scalp or two," if possible. The father differed from everyone. He was altogether disappointed and annoyed; he would not consent to any such scheme; he would not give a rap to further it. "George was acting inconsistently; he sent out different views by every mail—he seemed to look out for his duty through a telescope. What would become of England, if all her sons went off skylarking to the antipodes? Were his talents given him to bury in the ground?" The father could find no excuse for such a visionary plan; a Scripture reader—one of the people, brought up at hard work and rough living, was the right sort for missionary work. How could George reconcile the throwing aside as worthless the scholarly work of years? With a conscientious desire to make the best of his talents, Mr. Vernon argued warmly that would *not* be making the best of his talents. It was a warped notion, a narrow view of a great future; he would have none of it.

George winced as he read. Looking with his father's eyes, he *found no injustice in his remarks* but while they grieved they *did*

not convince him. He did not for an instant consider himself misunderstood as a martyr, nor for one moment question his own convictions. All that was over; he felt sure he was right; and so feeling, he could bear to wait for his father to change his opinion; whereas the father believed his boy's reversal of the existing scheme would be but a matter of time. The mother thought differently. She had puzzled out the problem in her own way, and dare not attempt to argue against it. With her it was a matter of conscience, nay, of life and death; with her husband it was a senseless, irrational proceeding, almost, if not quite, culpable. So George stood to his guns, took up his small legacy, and entered heart and soul into the preparatory training.

"What a good old fellow he must be!" Will exclaimed, when he fully understood the situation. "Osborne and I think we should like to follow his example, father; only, of course, you see we haven't got his goodness."

Mr. Vernon turned on his eldest son in sudden alarm. "George can spend his own money as he pleases," he said grimly. "I can't afford to make ducks and drakes with mine. You'll please to take no whims into your empty head, Will!"

"Now, now!" was the rejoinder, in a tone of gentle forbearance. "Why do you rush at conclusions like this? I said I am not good enough to do as George does; but I dare say he'll have a jolly lot of sport out there; though I doubt whether he'll get any dancing. Queer lot of girls, too, I expect."

"All you think of—dancing and girls!"

"Well, girls wouldn't be invented if they were not meant to be thought of; and, well, I've seen you waltzing at every hop I've been to, father!"

His father half smiled. "I thought you were broken-hearted," he retorted. "You said you were a while ago!"

Will blushed. He and his father were out in camp together for a few days' shooting. The dragoons had been exchanged, and had left Wattibuldi for England, and Will had not gone with them. Mr. Vernon had made interest, and got Will transferred to do duty with the new regiment, so as to keep him near him, for Will's extravagant tastes were not yet modified.

"It isn't fair to rake up things against a fellow," he pleaded; "and you yourself said if a girl chucked a man over, as May did, she wasn't worth grieving over."

"She was never worth a sensible man's love," the commissioner

exclaimed. "I think she ought to return that ring. How much did I give for it?"

"Oh!" cried Will, clapping his hands over his ears. "Don't, father——"

"She'll have a fine collection in time," Mr. Vernon continued. "First yours, then that poor lieutenant's on the troop-ship, and then the present favorite's, the new captain—I forget the fellow's name. Oh, I certainly think you might ask for your ring; it would come in useful, no doubt, besides saving me a lot——"

Will got up, distorting his face. "Let it go, and be——" He stopped short. "I'd like to go home, and meet her," he added; "just to let her see I don't care a scrap; but, father, you yourself saw her crying her eyes out, when the colonel didn't consent to our engagement at first. What could she have meant?"

"Pooh!" was the answer, as Mr. Vernon puffed a curl of smoke from his pipe. "Who can say what a feckless creature like that means? She had no meaning; her moment's whim was crossed, so she cried. You are well out of it, my boy, and for goodness' sake keep clear of such another."

"I wish that sailor fellow would have a breach of promise suit against her," Will added ruefully. "I would, only she isn't worth the trouble."

"And perhaps she would show up your *billets-doux*!"

Will winced, then he said slyly, "Her spelling was as bad as mine, though."

He joined in his father's laughter, and then they went off together to kill something for dinner.

William had again been unfortunate in a love affair, and once more he was made to acknowledge he had chosen unadvisedly. In the four years which had passed since he came to India, he had grown into a handsome man, a thorough soldier, a good linguist, and a fairly correct speller; his boyish heart alone remained unchanged; he was still prone to jump to conclusions, to see gold in dross, and frequently to fall a victim to specious blackguards. His beauty, his winsome ways, and geniality made him a favorite with men and women alike; only his father saw the plague spot that neutralized his kindly temper and unselfishness in the lack of solidity to hold his own and say "No" in the right place. It was more to gratify the moment's fancy than from any lasting affection that led him to get engaged to May Lester, and take up the rôle of an "engaged man." Her departure for England was rather

a relief to him, though he thought proper to place his *fiancée* in the care of his dearest friend, Osborne, when the regiment left the station, and to accompany it on his first march, returning to Wat-tibuldi in the character of a heart-broken lover, a character he sustained only for two days. Perhaps he was really more angry than hurt when Osborne wrote from Suez to say "Miss Lester would have none of what she called his *espionage*, and, indeed, had already transferred her engagement ring to her right hand, and was 'carrying on' with the first lieutenant on the trooper, a member of a *rich* family." No fresh engagement, however, was formally announced; but a "grander" ring appeared on that significant finger on the left hand long before they left the ship for Brindisi. From headquarters in England Miss Lester herself wrote to break off her schoolgirl engagement, as she was pleased to call it; and by the same mail the faithful Osborne related how the first lieutenant was discovered to be only a poor outside member of the family whose name lent greatness to him, and that his ring now kept company with Will's, while "a fool of a chap," lately joined, was the reigning favorite. "His father made a heap by nails, they say," Osborne added, "and he has a thousand a year allowance. A whopping diamond now adorns the wedding digit, and Mrs. Lester grins all day like a Cheshire cat. I wonder you ever cared for such a girl!"

"I like that!" Will cried mentally, stamping wrathfully as he read. "Osborne was more in love than anyone."

Will worked with the new regiment manfully, and, while smarting under May's treatment, passed a first-class examination in languages, and had special notice from the viceroy while he was in Calcutta.

Mr. Vernon had pinned his faith on George. It had seemed to him possible to give up his own career more easily with the hope of leaving this brilliant son to carry on the name and prestige. He had pictured George going the old rounds on the old lines, making it so easy for his father to sit at home and picture the boy winning his way among the great native landowners, first for his name's sake, then for his own; and Mr. Vernon was beginning to sigh for home. With George at hand—prudent old George—Will would have had a safe counsellor and friend; but now that George had "flung his chances to the winds," Will's career seemed of greater importance. The father acknowledged in his letters to his wife that he could not have borne the protracted separation from her

but for his eldest boy's light-hearted companionship, his unfailing good-humor, his almost womanly affection. There had been times, especially when unexpected bills came in, when the commissioner's moods had been difficult to bear in silence; yet after the most humiliating scolding, when the young man's long eyelashes had drooped over his pale cheeks, as if he dare not meet his angry father's gaze, he would suddenly flash up his bright eyes and say something so intensely funny in its mixture of contrition and exculpation that the shame seemed lifted from the rightful head and laid upon the other's, and the "graceless son," as he had just been called would be forgiven like a naughty child.

"He's a mere boy yet, an unreasonable, inconsiderate child!" Mr. Vernon said in self-excuse for paying another bill; "no more to be trusted than little Toby at home"; but as he said so, his heart expanded toward him. "There is no vice," he would add. "Thank God, the dear lad has no vice."

The year following the break-up of the old house in Great Street was, however, to be really his last in harness; his work, so far as India was concerned, was then to finish; he must make room for a younger man, must change the habits of a lifetime, and go back to add to the ranks of the unemployed, to settle down into old foggydom, among the fogs and east winds of England. "I think I shall have a run over to the old country, though, some winter," he would say, in talking over the advancing date, when he must resign, with old friends after dinner. "I shouldn't like to think I am leaving forever—yet it won't be the same thing; you'll all be scattered, there'll be bumptious young fellows in all our places, dak bungalows will be dismal resting places, commissariat elephants will be denied, bazaar meat will have to serve instead of grain-fed mutton; it will be India with the gilt off. I'm not sure I should care to be a nobody in this country; it will be bad enough to be nobody at home."

He spoke laughingly, but he meant and felt what he said; yet he thoroughly enjoyed this last term of office.

Fabian, who at that time was on a gunboat, came into Bombay harbor, and so got leave to join his father in the Northwest Provinces. As good luck would have it Dalrymple's regiment was within forty miles of Wattibuldi, and Dalrymple joined it just as Fabian reached India, and then Mr. Vernon planned a tiger hunt on a large scale, and took his three sons out to camp, to show them *royal sport*.

When the brothers met—no longer boys, but men, doing men's work—they stared at each other in silence. Fabian towered above them, his figure broad and burly, his sunburnt face no longer inconsequent and boyish. He and Will had not seen each other since they left home, and both noted a great difference. There was plenty of "side" on the elder still; but it was easy to see there was something else which made the little affectation becoming to the smart soldier, and the sailor brother appreciated it; while Will, lost in admiration of Fabian's height and bulk, veiled his feelings of approbation with brotherly bluntness, and "supposed he was made useful as ballast to his ship." Dalrymple had none of his pert speeches ready; he had been going through a salutary course of being sat upon for the last two years, and it had done him good; he was beginning that gracious period of dawning manhood, when it is borne upon the novice that there are greater people than himself in the world, that he had best withhold his opinion till he is asked to give it, and that self-valuation is seldom accepted as the right valuation. Happy the young man or woman who has sense to recognize the situation, and to be content with a back seat till he clearly hears an invitation to go up higher. He was ready to give the respectful "sir," in answering his superiors in age or rank, ready to listen instead of to speak. When the brothers had been together a day or two they resumed the old boyish confidences, and then the "youngster," as the elders called Dalrymple, showed there was still a fair share of self-esteem remaining, though it was now kept for private consumption only.

Mr. Vernon was so unfeignedly satisfied with his boys that he could even speak calmly of George's "craze." He introduced the three to the lieutenant-governor of the Northwest Provinces, whose camp happened to be within an easy ride, and received his congratulations on their promise. The lieutenant-governor had no sons, only a nurseryful of girls, and he declared he would gladly exchange the whole lot for one of the Vernons. The elder children were under the care of a governess; their mother could not make up her mind to send them to England, so she kept them out in the district during the cold season, and at a hill-station during the rains, until she discovered that Adela was beginning to look conscious when young men were present, and to resent being treated as a child. To be sure, though she was only fifteen, she *was as tall as her mother*, and it was useless to deny the fact that *young men paid her the attention seldom accorded to mere school-*

girls. There was an alacrity about their attentions, too; indeed, a jealousy of each other's attentions which could not be overlooked; and Mrs. Meredith was never more sensible of this than when Mr. Vernon's sons were welcomed to the intimacy of the family.

In the freedom of their district camp life, the children shared their parents' meals, rode with them to the surrounding villages, and were friendly with the native gentlemen who were constantly visiting the Burra Sahib for advice and assistance. To be sure, the governess was always present, too; but Miss Adela rarely submitted to her control. "The children" were under Miss Smith's care, she said; but *she* was Miss Meredith—her mother's natural companion.

Accustomed as Adela was to the constant society of officers and civilians of all ages, yet the arrival of the three Vernons impressed her. They were, somehow, different to the majority of the youths she had been accustomed to. Will was an old friend, and his darling at the rajah's fort was a favorite story in the schoolroom. She knew all about his love affair, too, and regarded him as a man of experience, as well as a hero; but of sailors she knew nothing, and her almost childish fancy was at once taken by Fabian's stalwart figure and beaming blue eyes. He was a young Viking—a Viking of Old World romance—for she was ignorant of the real meaning of the term, and, had she known it, would have had none of it—that fairy prince of the north, who swept the seas with his ship, full of merry men, landing here and there to rescue a princess wearing a golden crown over her wealth of golden hair, and passing on again over mountainous waves to hold high revel in some false king's castle, leaving the owner in chains, to lament his sins and shortcomings.

Fabian succumbed at once to Adela's frank admiration, her surroundings all added to her charms: the camp with its orderly streets of white canvas, the semi-state of its appointments, the elephants with their picturesque trappings and attendants, the numerous horses tethered in the open, the many servants in royal livery, the dashing escort, the numerous official petty officers, the great Durbar tent, with its fluttering standard, the great forest trees, the glorious weather, and strange birds and creatures, all formed a setting to the picture which fairly fascinated the sailor. Dalrymple, too, faithless youth, put aside the memory of Constantia and watched his opportunities of getting in a word or two *with this fresh goddess*.

The lieutenant-governor's party, of course, took part in the tiger hunt, as did one of the native landowners. Mrs. Meredith and some lady friends were to be posted on elephants, so as to see the sport with as little danger as possible. Adela tried her utmost to be taken with her mother—indeed, in private, she cried and stormed at the indignity of being left with the children. Her eyes were noticeably red when she appeared at *chōta hazari*, just as the dawn was giving place to day, and she watched the long procession start without her, without attempting to smile and wave her hands with her little sisters, as elephant after elephant, in its war paint, with gay howdahs filled with excited sportsmen, and accompanied by a small army of servants on horseback and on foot, moved, with huge strides, from the camp, and passed out of sight into the jungle. The Vernons were to meet the governor near the hunting ground, where *shikarees*, who had for days watched the tigers' movements, would pilot them to the scene of action.

There was no help for it; orders had been left—positive orders that the girls were not to leave the camp till late in the afternoon, when an elephant would be in readiness to take them to meet the returning party at a certain part of the road near a certain mango tope. At that spot they were to wait, and upon no account to go beyond it; a suspicious ravine being a little way further on, where a tiger, if wounded, might find cover.

Adela let Miss Smith feel her temper that long day till it was time to start; but once up in the howdah, she let her mood go, and the three young sisters made merry as they were carried forward out into the open country.

The *mahout* had known his young ladies from their babyhood—the mounted servants, following close, had carried them in their arms, and sang them to sleep. Mrs. Meredith would have let them travel through India with such trusty guards, and that any harm could happen during the few miles' ride was about as impossible as any earthly thing can be impossible. The elephant stepped onward, the heat of the day was over, strings of dejected bony cows were proceeding to their shelters in single file, sniffing now and then at the dusty ground, lest by chance a juicy blade of grass might be procurable; an all but naked blacklead-like cowherd followed, sometimes adjuring his charges, sometimes singing *his nasal, monotonous song* to the cuckoo in the tope. A few *jackals* might be seen occasionally, skulking among the bel bushes;

and the kites in mid-air, squealing, were as usual very much visible and audible. A far-off mud temple, with its sheltering tree, covered with rag streamers, little groups of mud-huts, hardly discernible from the soil, topes of grand mangoes, mimosa trees with gold blossoms, solitary *sárees* by solitary pools, crickets galore, and crows and mynas—these were the only sights and sounds, and to these sights and sounds the girls were so well accustomed that they failed to notice them. When presently they reached the halting place, and the huge beast was moved round to face the track along which the sportsmen were expected to appear, and the girls ceased to feel the air meeting them, they began to grow impatient, to call the view dull and to be irritated by the reiterated sounds of insect and bird life.

Action and variety are necessary to the young, rest and silence are to them but pretty terms for dullness and the fidgets, and Adela soon began to exclaim against the enforced inactivity, and presently to use her persuasive power to induce the *mahout* to take them further on. The man was very willing to gratify her; but he consulted his companions first and they were firm. The Mem Sahib had said so far and no further. Their pay would be cut if they disobeyed, and, worse still, they would not be trusted with the *missi babas* again.

Adela tried sarcasm next, and made them quiver because they could not retaliate. No lash hits like the lash of a tongue, and the *mahout* was very sorrowful. Were not the young ladies more to him than his father and his mother? Would he not gladly let his pay be cut, to please them? But it was not the loss of his pay he feared, but the loss of his situation, should he fly in the face of the Burra Sahib's orders.

Nevertheless, as continual dropping wears away the hardest stone, so the little girls' continued pleading, now sarcastic, now persuasive, at last prevailed, and the elephant was taken some hundreds of yards on, perilously near that ravine, full of cover, to avoid which the careful mother had given special orders. It was such a fascinating ravine, too, from the open, at all events; there were tall grasses, flowering shrubs, great waving clumps of bamboo, like giant Prince of Wales' feathers, wide-spreading trees, in and out of which the lively green parrots flew; there were dozens of squirrels also frisking about, and many birds, and patches of almost green verdure in dense shade, and a trickling of sparkling water; altogether a delicious-looking ravine, much too innocent to

hide danger, as Adela forcibly protested. Into its recesses, however, the servants would not go. They would remain where they were for half an hour, just to make a change for the missies, and then, not to be found out of bounds, they would return to the spot appointed.

The time flew. The girls were amused by the birds and the squirrels, the servants refreshed themselves and their beasts by draughts of the sparkling water, from which they first picked many obnoxious insects, and then the elephant's head was guided round, and the little party started to retrace their steps. They had hardly started, however, before the great beast began to show signs of fear—a fear quickly communicated to his *mahout*. He tossed his trunk to and fro, raised his feet quickly without making greater way, and at last stopped suddenly.

The *mahout* uttered some encouraging words; he saw nothing to raise alarm; the high cover was unstirred; there were no sounds but the natural sounds; so he struck the creature roughly with the iron prod, and thus forced him to proceed a few paces.

Adela jumped to her feet. "What ails him?" she asked.

"He may be in a temper," was the reply, "or he may scent an evil animal. Why did you make us disobey the Mem Sahib?"

Again the elephant came to a sudden stop, jerking Adela violently back to her seat, and this time the cause was self-evident. Close by, almost within touch of the gigantic pad of the frightened monster, lay asleep a baby tiger, soft and round and sleek as a pet cat, yet for all its beauty and its helpless cubhood, the natural enemy of its enormous neighbor. All through the elephant ran a quiver of terror, while the girls, in ecstasies of delight, called out for the "little darling" to be picked up, and reached to them at once, that they might carry it home in triumph. The men implored them to leave it alone, lest its mother, lingering near, should miss it before they had got out of reach, and attack them, to effect its rescue; but, as the servants foreboded, the young ladies laughed at such cowardice, and took possession of the cub with admiration and delight.

Once more the elephant obeyed his driver and went on, but he was still far from easy. His trunk continued to sway to and fro, forward and backward, and his little eyes worked round and round; the howdah was by no means a restful place, and presently *not even the pleasure of their new acquisition could reconcile its inmates to its uneasy, vibrating motion.* The mounted servants

exchanged lowered remarks with the *mahout*, and, in answer to the girls' repeated questions, made no answer; indeed, it was soon impossible to speak at all, for the elephant began trumpeting as he increased his strides, and the horsemen, after one look backward, gave their horses the rein and galloped forward.

The *mahout* managed to make Adela understand she should throw out the little cub, but she would not; and almost as the man spoke there came a roar of fury and despair, and a tigress leaped into view not fifty yards behind, and came bounding and yelling toward them.

CHAPTER XXII

FOR THE LAST TIME

ALL had gone well with the united expedition. Of royal game there was a bag of three full-grown males—they had shown the right amount of exciting sport without any terrible marring accident—they had shown singly, and after many fascinating escapes, had died at last without being able to take vengeance by mauling anyone in their death throes. A superb peacock, measuring nearly seven feet, lay stretched out in his splendid plumage in exquisite sheening contrast to the black-barred tawny tigers; he had fallen to Dalrymple's rifle, and was to be preserved and sent to Toby, in fulfilment of a promise given before the elder brother started for India.

Toby had stopped crying when Dalrymple bade him good-by, because of this promise, and Dalrymple laid special orders on his *shikaree* to be careful of the beautiful bird.

"Won't the little fellow be pleased?" he said to Will. "It is to be the beginning of his c'lection."

There were graceful deer, too, laid out in the row of dead game, which was placed in front of the ladies for their inspection; and Mrs. Meredith thought murder enough had been committed, and was for starting home long before the men were satisfied.

It was later than had been anticipated when the return commenced, and Mr. Vernon and his sons excused themselves from dining with the lieutenant-governor on that account, and would have branched off to their own camp just where the ravine, near

which the girls had been standing out of bounds, broke the regularity of the jungles, but for a sound which came faintly on the evening wind as the party came to a standstill to take leave—the unmistakable squeal of a tiger, and the terrified shriek of an elephant.

But one interpretation could be put upon these sounds—the girls were in danger.

The governor, Mr. Vernon, Will, and Fabian, were riding on a pad; it took them a very short time to load their rifles, and then urge their elephant to its utmost speed. Fabian was accustomed to such rough motion, and he managed to keep on by clinging tight to the pad straps, while oscillating from side to side, pitching and tossing as on an angry sea. The elephant was young, and in thorough training; he raised his trunk and trumpeted as the cries of the beast ahead grew more audible; he was eager for whatever fray was before him—perhaps he reasoned that the sahibs he carried had already laid three tigers low; what was one more to them? It is certain that beyond swinging his trunk and trumpeting more and more violently as he came in view of the scene of action, he showed no intention of declining battle with the maddened tigress, which was leaping and bounding in front of the girls' terrified elephant, watching for an opportunity to spring upon him. The mounted servants had disappeared; the *mahout* seated on the elephant's head was shouting and threatening in mortal terror; two of the little girls were huddled together at the bottom of the howdah, while Adela, with white face and shining eyes, stood up, looking wildly round for the help which seemed impossible; the little creature, the cause of all the danger and commotion, slept peacefully in her arms.

Almost before the rest of the rescuing party realized what had happened, Fabian had scrambled down without waiting for the elephant to halt, and coolly taking aim at the tigress as she fawned and capered, sent a bullet true to the brain. In its death agony it turned upon the shooter, and Fabian's first tiger would have been his last had not the old elephant, realizing his foe was no longer to be feared, suddenly caught the staggering brute beneath his huge feet, and flinging her savagely to and fro, trampled her speedily out of knowledge.

In many a night to come that "tiger dream" spoilt the sisters' rest; but the incident was of use in causing Adela to be sent to England without further delay, to learn to recognize the beauty of

discipline. She was very pale and subdued that night at dinner, and kept close to her mother all the evening. Fabian was the hero of the hour, and he bore his honors blushing; his host's overpowering thanks and his hostess' tearful ejaculations quite distressed him; he declared the elephant was the real *shikar*, and that he himself had not run the slightest danger.

Adela did not even look at him when she bade him good-by—it had been impressed upon her that had the tiger killed him, his death would have lain at her door. And while she murmured her thanks and adieux, her contrition was very heartfelt; he saw tears on her long eyelashes, and felt her little hand tremble in his, and wished there were not so many eyes upon him, that he might have spoken out and bade her cheer up, and forced her to laugh instead of to weep; but as it was, he felt like a ninny, bending his tall form over the shrinking child, while he blushed up to his hair, shook her hand as if it were a pump-handle, and, in the words of Mr. Toots, assured her "it was of no consequence."

After all, excepting that moment of terrible anxiety, when they came upon the furious tigress, the father and his sons spent a perfect week together in camp. Mr. Vernon recognized his boys as his equals, they recognized him as a delightful companion who treated them as cherished guests—paid deference to their opinions, and consulted their tastes. To Fabian and Dalrymple it was a new delightful sensation to be recognized as men, instead of being merely tolerated as boys. As the father smoked with his sons after dinner, sitting outside their canvas home with the bright stars hanging from the blue heaven, and the silence of the uninhabited jungles around, he conversed with them as on the same level with himself, and took no notice of any foolish undigested remark or self-opinionated twaddle, only too thankful that vice and intemperance had no place in their talk. On the last evening before they separated he led the conversation to the far distant home, and then he saw how tender the lads' hearts were, how quickly their laugh rang out at old stories and schoolboy tricks—how easily their voices softened as they mentioned the dear familiar names. Dalrymple had most to say about those recent events of which the others only knew by writing; and it was from him the father gathered all the little details letters, however full and concise, cannot supply.

It was nearly dawn when each ceased to ask and receive news concerning those far-off dear ones. And Fabian and Dalrymple,

whose way for the first forty miles was the same, at once bathed and breakfasted, and started without either thought for, or need of, the refreshment of sleep. Next Will cleared out and rode away in the opposite direction, for Wattibuldi; and the father struck camp and went forward to hold an assize at a large village, his heart full of thankfulness for this rest by the way.

Surely he might look hopefully to the future of these three out of his six sons—indeed, they had unconsciously made him hopeful of four by their stanch trust in “good old George,” and the distressed look which had filled Dalrymple’s face at his father’s condemnation of “the foolish fellow,” and had half persuaded the elder man that, after all, George might have chosen “the better part.” There was only one unsatisfactory thing in all this budget of home news which Dalrymple had brought out: Harold’s priggish selfishness and occasional cruelty to his little brother. That it was more than childish mischief was certain, because “mother gets worried.” And Mr. Vernon knew it must be something unusually trying for the mother to show “worry.” In her letters she never alluded to such a feeling. Harold’s ability and industry were often mentioned, though once she had regretted the elder boy’s influence was taken away just when it would have been so useful to the little brothers; so with the light of Dalrymple’s disclosures, the father became uneasy lest something of his step-brother’s nature should develop itself. It was time, he told himself, that he went home and took his share in family life, and be at hand to prune with an unsparing knife the weeds in his boys’ characters.

That Harold might grow up a second Richard was a terrible thought, and the father, as he considered the possibility, told himself that further position and higher pay were not for an instant to be desired, if they interfered with Harold’s future welfare. A father’s eye and a father’s hand are needed most when the boy is in that intermediate rank—neither small nor big—when self looms disproportionately large, and he cannot recognize as important aught but the passing moment. A kiss and a fondle satisfy and blind a mother, who trusts more than she fears, but the father needs no blandishment, and sees clearly the unreality of the excuse and apology.

As Mr. Vernon went forward through the land he had become *so loath to leave*, he blamed himself for thinking too much of “*place and position*,” too little of the responsibilities of

home. He was unusually absent-minded as he held his court, and took so little notice of the false swearing that his senior clerk began to fear lest the strong head and ready resource were failing. All through the night-watches doubts and plans alien to his work possessed him; all through the following days his aims and ambitions became as it were distraught. What had appeared, only a few hours ago, the most desirable thing on earth, was now purposeless; and the ambitions he had cherished "for his son's sake," turned upon him, and became undesirable for the like reason.

The cosey home, no longer overrun by hobbledehoys—the one riding-horse—the leisure for study and chosen companionship, seemed no longer dull and monotonous. It would be like going back to his early married life—that happy, hopeful period—but enriched with wide experience, with delightful memories and with ambitions—no longer for himself, but for those numerous branches who in their turn would stand before the world and share its good and evil. That apocryphal old couple, Darby and Joan, became possible patterns for him and Amy. What was there compared with her sweet bright companionship in this India of perpetual change and parting? What was there in a great retinue, in state ceremonies, in meaningless forms, and the incessant responsibility of his present life to compensate for the home love awaiting him? How was it these thoughts had to a certain extent lain dormant through these last few years—the separation which had been so imperative? How was it he now saw how easily it could be bridged? Was it that the few days of his boys' society, the glance of one, the smile of another, the quick repartee of another, had brought the long unseen wife to him in living flesh and blood framed in that familiar scene bright with familiar faces, eloquent with the deeds of his schoolboy life, making it not only possible but absolutely necessary for him to forego all further preferment, to cut asunder the ties and habits of more than thirty years, to sink the Burra Sahib with his pomp and power, and be content to subside into plain Mr. — "Something in the Civil Service out in India, you know"?

He went back to Wattibuldi still with his previous thoughts and plans unsettled, and Will found him so grave and abstracted that he began to wonder whether the father was developing a liver, after all. Will was rather grave, too, just then, for he had been silly enough to be taken in by a horse-dealer, notwithstanding his belief in *himself as a judge of horseflesh*, and instead of listening to the *regimental vet's* advice, had bought a worn-out screw, with

fired legs, at a cost which would cripple his resources for six months ahead. That was not the worst; he had intended the beast to be his charger in the approaching camp at Delhi, but quickly discovered it was absolutely unsafe; so, unless he could persuade his father to come to his rescue, he must apply for leave, and go off to do it cheap in Cashmere, losing all the brilliancy of Delhi, all his chance of cutting a dash, and drawing upon himself the admiring attention of bright eyes and observant commanders, and must, in fact, take a back seat for some time to come. Mr. Vernon's gravity looked unpromising, and lasted for many days; but at last, one Sunday morning, after early church, when Will always contrived to go home to breakfast in the deep, well-shaded veranda of the Residency with his father, the latter himself broached the subject which was disturbing the son's peace.

"So," he said, as they seated themselves under the punka, and the covers were taken off the dishes before them, "so my knowledgeable eldest son, that great judge of horseflesh, that keen-sighted warrior, has been taken in by a rat-tailed, wall-eyed, spavined, broken-kneed, used-up——"

"Oh, father!" Will cried, gasping at the hard epithets. "Come, now; the beast's bad, but not so bad!"

"Is he paid for?"

"Yes—well—all but. I gave the fellow a note, you know; so it's all the same as if—only—of course——"

"How much?"

"Seven hundred rupees."

"He's worth seven."

"Thereabout."

"For the knacker's yard?"

"I don't know what possessed me," Will cried. "He seemed so likely, and the fellow said he had another offer, and couldn't give me till you saw him; and—well, I did think I knew all about it."

"Just so. How do you propose to live in the meantime?"

Not a word.

"Of course you could ride my horses, and cadge on here, and——"

"Father!"

"But, all the same there are your mess expenses, and odds and ends, such as servants and clothes. Did you consider how they were to be paid?"

"I thought of living on my pay, and giving my allowance to the fellow as it comes in."

"Then you've no back debts, no tailor's bill; or do you believe your clothes will not wax old nor your shoes wear out until the beast is paid for?"

Will looked up with renewed courage, and his gloomy voice grew jubilant as he answered:

"No, I don't expect a miracle; but I owe nothing to any tailor or shoemaker, and I've got as many suits and boots—unless white ants play the dickens with them—as will last till—oh, till I go home, at any rate."

Mr. Vernon looked at him fixedly. "You never told me a lie, Billy," he said. "I may believe you?"

Will was not slow to see his advantage; he struck an attitude—a Pecksniffian attitude.

"I may be a fool," he said, "but a knave—no!"

Mr. Vernon sighed; but it was more a sigh of relief than distress. He had seen so many promising young lives ruined by debt, so many careers sullied by selfish meanness, that he had no very high estimate of the ordinary youth's principles of justice and honor. That Will was foolish and inconsiderate about expenditure he had long known, to his cost; but he had never discovered in him culpable dishonesty. Yet it was a matter of thankfulness now to hear the lad was unhampered by ordinary debts, and it augured well for his safety when he should be left to his own devices that he was able to see now how well it was that he had taken his father's reiterated advice, and allowed no bills to accumulate. It had been well indeed for him that he had had his father's firm, kind hand to restrain him at first. Alas for the lads who have only their own crude notions to guide them! To how many a spoilt life may it be said, "I wot that through ignorance ye did it!" Still the life is spoilt, and the cost is theirs.

Mr. Vernon left the subject, and Will did not dare to refer to it again. His was a very hopeful nature, and he firmly believed "something would happen" to help him over his difficulties. He was full, too, of what his father told him that same day, a piece of startling news which Will repeated next morning on parade. "The governor has chucked up the whole thing, and is going home for good." And everyone began to wonder and regret, and for a few hours the station was sorry to a man; but human nature is buoyant, and before night everyone was wondering how to afford certain coveted possessions which would be sold when the Residency changed hands, and trying to discover the next likely occu-

pant. The king is dead—Long live the king. What should we do without these compensations?

Thus Mr. Vernon's long communings with himself had ended in sending in his resignation, and blinding his eyes and deafening his ears to those ambitions and hopes which would have kept him in the treadmill. How much it had once meant to him! how little he thought of it now! It seemed to him, as he looked on his surroundings with altered eyes, that he had only held to his post for Will's sake, and now that Will had proved himself capable, the cause for further stay in India no longer existed. Will had outgrown his extravagance, the mistake about the horse was only a lesson which would never need to be repeated. The mistake about May Lester had been another excellent lesson. In one more year Will would come home on leave, would probably then find a nice wife; and then, as a family man, his father could hope his successful future would be assured. Dalrymple was of another nature—a much more decided, independent character. He was in an expensive regiment, had tastes which were in themselves something of safeguards; his "c'lections" stood to him in place of bewitching eyes and dangerous games of chance. His colonel was an old family friend, and treated him as his son. He might, therefore, be safely trusted, as far as could be seen, to steer clear of the great quicksands so fascinating to many inexperienced eyes. No, there was no need to fret about leaving on Dal's account. Indeed, the great need now seemed to lie at home, where he might succeed in proving to that obstinate George how he was about to ruin his prospects by persisting in his mad missionary schemes, and to keep a tight hand on that small boy who was growing priggish and tyrannical. So, once decided to go, the Burra Sahib became eager to be off; fevered to lay down his trappings of office, nervously fearful lest something should arise to place obstacles in his homeward way. He began to fancy his health was giving way, began to take precautions in his going out and about; nay, even in his food and clothing, which had never occurred to him before in all his long time of service. He amazed all his servants by his unaccustomed fidgets, and his colleagues by his lack of zeal. He sent his list of effects out even before his resignation was accepted, and as each item was taken he at once sent it home, till he was left like an anchorite, with bare necessities, so anxious he was not to be *hampered and hindered* at the last.

Then, when the time actually arrived, and all the station and the

neighboring towns and villages rose up to speed him on his way; when patient native friends waited for hours to see him pass by; when the poorest squatted in dense rows round his gates with their trays of offerings; when the petty rajahs flocked into the station to ask for last words of advice; when his *klassies* and servants prostrated themselves with bitter murmurs for his going and blessings for his welfare; when a vast crowd accompanied his first march out, shouting their good wishes, and pleading for his return; and when he stepped on board the ship at the Apollo Bund at Bombay; and when he wrung in silence the hands of old colleagues and old friends; and, last of all, when Will's handsome face was pressed to his with the boyish affection Will never thought too childlike, it was suddenly borne in upon the traveller that he was shutting the door upon his life's business, and in that brief moment of bitterness not even the thought of home could comfort him. With a smile on his lips, and a heart like lead, he remained waving and gazing on the crowd at the bund, till the fixed faces were blurred out of recognition by his own tears. He never moved till the darkness fell and blotted out the land—the land where he had known more happiness than sorrow; where he had learnt to suffer and be strong, where he had learnt the blessedness of friendship, where his youth and his prime had been passed, his children been born, where his baby girls had blossomed and faded, and where remained many a faithful dusky friend he would never see again, till all should stand together, without distinction of color and caste, at the day of judgment.

When Will got back to Wattibuldi, he found a receipt in full for his luckless purchase in horseflesh. It was his father's farewell greeting, another proof of his ceaseless care; and as Will read it with renewed sorrow for that father's absence, he registered many a vow that he would try to prove more worthy of such love.

CHAPTER XXIII

BURIED AT SEA

LEFT with her two little boys—the remnant of the family—and only a very occasional and very short visit from George, Mrs. Vernon felt more and more that the separation from her husband *had lasted long enough*. India, indeed, held half the family at

that moment, and she actually began to question with herself the possibility of leaving Harold and Arthur in their grandmother's care, and going out again, with or without her husband's permission. There were times when she felt she could live no longer without seeing him and Will, and when the constantly recurring promise of only one year more became mere meaningless words, so often had circumstances proved their emptiness. Yet, again, when Arthur was ill, or Harold tyrannical, she felt her proper place was with them. Harold was often conscience-stricken, often softened and repentant; and at such times his mother's words touched him, and he would try to improve for a time; and she knew that these were precious moments, to be made the most of—moments unlikely to be noticed by any but a mother, moments which, unimproved on, would soon cease, and the lad's character would soon harden and deteriorate. She, too, as she saw his bullying conduct to his delicate little brother, and to his smaller schoolfellows, feared lest he should prove another Richard, and this terror generally reconciled her to her half existence. Harold appeared different to all his brothers; he was rude to the servants, impatient of control, domineering, and perfectly self-important; he was very much bigger than Arthur, older in every way, and took upon himself to give orders in the house and interfere with arrangements, as if he was master. Yet at school he was a model pupil; and though the boys disliked him, the masters were all on his side. He loved learning as no wholesome boy loves it (his schoolfellows declared), and he rejoiced in knowing he was held up to the lower school as a pattern, a distinction sufficient to raise any amount of ill feeling toward him, especially as he openly bragged of and jeered at ordinary abilities. Of course his mother knew nothing of this. Her anxiety was entirely because of his unkindness to Toby and his rudeness to the servants. He told no lies—to her, at all events—was not dishonest, was rarely disobedient, always brought home good reports, and never shirked evening study; but when fresh evidences of his love of working on his little brother's sensitive nervous temperament were forced on her notice by the child's shrinking from shadows, and by his terrified cries in his sleep, she made up her mind to place Harold at school as a boarder. This threat was sufficient for the time. Harold knew his own unpopularity, and rightly guessed opportunities of paying off old scores *would be much easier if he lived at school. A school dormitory permits much treatment a guilty boy would not dare to meet; and*

as bully and coward are synonymous terms, he preferred to repent rather than suffer. Amy had a respite, therefore, and during it the Holroyds stayed with her, and complimented her on her clever, charming boys. Toby was thoroughly happy, too, to be let alone, and learnt to listen to his brother's fascinating stories without being prepared to clap his hands on his ears lest giants and ghosts should figure as heroes. A letter from Florence, while her visitors were with her, contained an account of meeting with Flossie and her former friends the Marleons. Flossie's husband, Signor Foski, had left the North of Italy and joined a lawyer in Florence; his relations had not treated Flossie kindly when they found she had no money, and that her parents had cast her off. So Foski sensibly determined to quit his native place and strike new roots in new soil. Flossie had accidentally met the Marleons in the street. She was not improved; her imaginary superiority as an Englishwoman made her contemptuous of the second-class Italians among whom she was placed. Her dress was *outré*, her manner flippant. Old Mrs. Vernon had been scandalized by her appearance and manner, and it had needed the remembrance of all the old ties between her father and Mr. Marleon to make him outwardly civil.

"Signor Foski was a great deal too good for her," wrote Mrs. Lancing. "Fortunately for him, he knows very little English, and her Italian is so bad that he can only partly understand that, so he remains ignorant of much she says. He seems a sober, hard-working young man. I am sure *he* is to be pitied—not she."

Mrs. Vernon mentioned the meeting, and the favorable opinion of Signor Foski entertained by the Marleon party; but her report did not content the parents, though they had declared they had done with Florence for ever, and at last the letter was given them to read.

It was as well, thought Amy, they should see the opinion of others. It certainly gave them a new impression, and afforded them food for thought. Titania's account of meeting with her former friend was so much less guarded it could not be shown. She described the cheap little lodging decked out with cheap finery, Flossy's foolish airs and ignorant housekeeping, and her pretentious superiority to her husband's friends.

"She's not even in love with him now, if she ever was," added this experienced critic. "He's just like that Italian barber who used to cut the boys' hair, you know, and tried to persuade them *to have it waved*. He smells of garlic too; still he is really too

good for her, for he speaks of her kindly, while she talks of him as if he were her servant. She asked after Fan, and *pitied* her dull life, actually begging me to tell Fan to go and stay with them for a little diversion. I wonder what Fan would do in those stuffy little rooms with no tea, and only macaroni for dinner? for she told me they couldn't afford to buy meat. I do wish, however, her father would relent, or I'm sure she'll quite sink into an idle, dirty state, for want of being kept up to English habits."

Urania, too, had something to say on the same subject, but she treated it more seriously.

"Something ought to be done," she wrote, "to save her from herself. Dear Mrs. Vernon gave her some money, and talked to her so kindly, and poor Flossy cried, and said she had only married because she thought she would be able to do as she liked, and now she sees she is ten times less able to have her own way. She never has a halfpenny in her pocket, for Signor Foski sees she is so inexperienced that he buys everything; and, of course, he buys what he likes, and never thinks her English notions are different to his. I do pity her, though she has been so silly, and I don't think her mother ought to be the one to turn against her, do you? You see, she never had dear people to train her as *we* had; it was all outside show with her and Fan. I am sure we should have been worse, if we hadn't met with the dear aunts."

Urania sent no message to George; but she never wrote without a reference to some sight he had specially recommended. The very pictures came in for special mention, because he had written about them. Amy could read between the lines; and as she read extracts from these girlish criticisms to George, when he paid his flying visits, she well understood the smile, and the deep interest with which he listened. No art critic had ever excited intenser.

"How well she describes!" he said once, with a sigh. "I can see the whole thing."

"But, then, you *have* seen it," his mother rejoined, with profound conviction.

"Oh, yes, of course," he said; "but the whole thing is most graphic."

"She is such a dear girl," Amy went on, still in innocent unconsciousness, as it seemed to him. "I can't think why one of you boys don't——"

He got up quickly and turned aside, saying, before she could finish the sentence:

"Which of us has anything to marry on—yet, at all events? It would be very presumptuous of a fellow to fetter a girl, don't you think, until he can offer her a comfortable home?"

"I don't think I ever considered the word 'comfort,' when I got engaged," she answered. "Lives are sometimes spoilt by prudence—quite as often, I'm sure, as by imprudence. If a man has fair prospects and sound health, and if the girl is sensible and well trained, why shouldn't they fight life together? But, of course, sense and method are absolutely essential. A love match, in the common acceptation of the words, means a reckless, blind disregard of adverse circumstances—a selfish, foolish——"

Again he interrupted her. "But, mother," he said, "suppose, just for argument, you know, suppose I had the cheek to ask a girl—such a girl as Urania, you know—would it be fair to ask her to bind herself to follow my fortunes to a foreign land, to put up with all sorts of inconvenience away from all her friends, and without any of her accustomed luxuries?"

"There you go again!" she cried, laughing to hide the feeling that this was more reality than "just for argument's sake." "Comfort, luxury, again! Isn't friendship better than these? loving companionship, kindly unselfish daily toil shared, and so unfelt, better worth having than Turkey carpets and smart clothes? A man or woman isn't worth having if comfort and luxury are prized more than these; besides, you are neither penniless nor without prospects. I don't see where the 'cheek' would be, if a girl loves a man properly for himself, not for what he can give her. Of course she would run no risk in accepting him in good faith."

She stopped—feeling was making her incoherent; his suspicion would be aroused. But he only laughed, with a boyishness she had long missed in him.

"I fear your heart runs away with your head, little mother," he cried. But she had cheered him immensely, and he went singing and whistling about with his little brothers all that day, as if a weight were lifted off his shoulders. She found him presently in the hall, showing Harold the construction of an old musket—one of Fabian's. Nothing would do for Toby but that it should be loaded and fired, so George strode off and bought some powder and shot, and gave the boys their first lesson in shooting at a mark.

"You'll give my love to granny and Aunt Gertrude, when next you write," he said, when he was returning to work next morning.

"All right. And the girls, too, I suppose?"

"Oh, of course." Then he added indifferently, "And if you like, you can tell Urania to be sure and note that Madonna nearest the first door in the Uffizzi, and see if it isn't her own likeness."

He sent his mother a telegram at midday, telling her he had forgotten to lock up the powder and shot. She should see to it at once.

But when Harold came in from school, and was asked for it, he knew nothing about it. George must have locked it up in the summer-house, and forgotten.

Toby was, of course; ignorant of its whereabouts.

But it was not to be found in the summer-house, nor in George's room, nor in any other likely place. It was therefore safe from being meddled with, as it could not be found, and the matter was dismissed from the mother's mind.

It was not long before the news of Mr. Vernon's resignation reached her, and that news put all other from her. To prepare for his return, to have the house and garden in order, to buy a horse and carriage—in fact, to kill any number of fatted calves—were her predominant desires. "When father is at home again," was the burthen of her song; and her letters to the absent sons were full of joyful anticipation. The hours, days, and weeks had never lagged as they lagged now. She went about the house "singing like a bird," her servants thought. She bethought her of overdue calls, and made haste to repair the lapse of etiquette. She did her best to understand the politics of the day, and made herself read the book of the season. "William must not return to a dull ignorance." She made a journey to town, too, to invest in the proper style of hat and gown. "William must not find a dowdy wife awaiting his arrival." Yet, in her heart, she knew he would see only her face, notice nothing of her dress; just as she would not care a scrap were he dressed as a "jungly wallah." It was only because, during that waiting-time, she could not sit still; indeed, she could hardly sleep, tired as she might be. If there was no real work for her mind and body, some must be imagined; and if reality afforded her no occupation, then fancy must provide it. She was altogether like a child close to the holidays, hoping, fearing, impatient of rest, impatient of work, unhinged and unsettled.

And the husband, "neither here nor there," as he told himself, coming home by the familiar route alone for the last time, losing *bit by bit* the sense of doing everthing "for the last time"; his *thoughts* insensibly turning to the work he had done with; his

ideas still full of the old routine; rousing himself with an effort to look forward altogether, and landing at the stopping places, as on former occasions, but now with a sense of delay; watching the record of the ship's progress; scanning the evening skies; wishing he had not left India, yet longing to be at home—living, as it were, in a dream. A silent, uninteresting man, many of his fellow-travellers decided; while all the while his thoughts were in a whirl, full of yesterday and to-morrow, only empty of to-day.

He was attracted by the ship's doctor more than by any of his fellow-passengers. They had met many years before, when both were beginning their careers, and had never again crossed each other's path till now. The doctor's life had not been prosperous. He had been a rolling stone, he had married, and his marriage had been a failure. He had travelled and worked to no purpose. As Mr. Vernon listened to his story, he guessed the why and wherefore. There was talent without industry, an indeterminate nature, a lack of concentrative power and energy. With twice as much earnest purpose, and half as much capability, he would have been a prosperous man. It was hard, indeed, at his age, to have to play a young man's unremunerative part for bare subsistence; and Mr. Vernon pitied him, and liked him as the strong pity and like the weak.

Dr. Harrow cordially rejoiced in Mr. Vernon's prosperity, and recognized its source; there was no envy in his character, no mean comparison or wondering comment on his friend's luck. He took a sincere interest in the six sons, and in the home waiting the traveller. It did not cross his mind that he himself was homeless, and it was this generous interest in another's good fortune which atoned for all his weakness. Evening after evening the two men walked the deck together, living their lives over again as they exchanged their many and wide experiences.

One evening, the last before they would leave the Red Sea for the Canal, Mr. Vernon missed his constant friend. The decks were all but deserted, and he was just about to turn in when the doctor appeared, and explained that he had been detained in the fo'c'sle by a bad case of delirium tremens.

"The fellow is cook's assistant," he added. "A capital servant when he's sober, but a fiend when drunk. He shipped with us in London this last voyage, with a first-rate character, which was probably forged, and I've had him in several severe bouts. But *this will be his last*; I don't expect him to live till morning. I'm

interested in him, for I think he's seen better days. At all events, he's familiar with medical terms, and once recommended me to give him certain drugs which actually were the right kind for his case. He speaks correctly, too, when he's off his guard. Our men seem to be suspicious, also, for they've dubbed him 'Gentleman Dick.' His name's Richards; at least, that's in his articles."

Mr. Vernon lighted a fresh cigar, as the doctor was inclined to remain on deck, and listened without feeling much interest.

"He's been a fine-looking fellow once," Dr. Harrow continued, too full of the patient to consider that his listener's polite "oh's" and "ah's" and "indeed's" lacked depth. "A wonderful length and breadth of frame! He is but a frame now, poor chap! as tall or taller than you, I fancy; and, by Jove!" he cried, staring hard at the stately figure by his side, "by Jove! putting difference of dress and class aside, you might be father and son!"

Mr. Vernon laughed lightly. "Much obliged," he said; "but you haven't unearthed a romance. My good father has lain in his grave many years."

The doctor laughed too. "I ought to apologize," he said, "for seeing a likeness to you in a degraded scamp like Richards; but there it is all the same. Come and have a look at him. He won't notice you; he's too far gone."

"What, in the fo'c'sle? My dear fellow, the air's stagnant enough up here, but it must be killing down there. I'll accept your word for it, that your interesting drunkard and I are as like as parent and child, but I don't care about visiting him."

Then they talked of something else, and continued pacing up and down till the last quarter of the moon came up and bathed the sea with silver. It shone so brightly into Mr. Vernon's cabin that he could not sleep, and in his wakefulness the doctor's talk repeated itself in his tired brain.

It was his turn now to cry "By Jove!" for a sudden conviction came to him, as the words came back, that the dying "drunken scamp" was Richard. What more likely than that, driven by want, he had been glad to take any situation which offered? It was probable a lingering dread of being detected had made him leave England as soon as he had lived through his ill-gotten gains. In his wandering life he must have played many parts, must have acquired many trades. He would naturally often have to be his *own cook*. Practice would enable him to become a *satisfactory cook for others*. The more Mr. Vernon reflected, the more con-

vinced he became that the resemblance to himself so strong to the surgeon was the resemblance which had always existed between the brothers, and he wondered at his density in not having been convinced sooner. It was the way of putting it, "as like as father and son," that had kept him from remembering Richard. Why, the very name was significant!

He lay tossing, conjecturing, and planning, listening to the untiring screws incessantly revolving, to the splashing of the sea against the ship's sides, to the hasty movements here and there among the men, till it became impossible for him to remain inactive any longer. Sons of one father, should one be dying and the other lie at ease with but a few planks between them? It seemed but yesterday they were boys together. Those days came vividly back to him as he rose and hastily dressed, while a mental mist mercifully obscured the recollection of the ruin and disgrace of his brother's manhood.

The passengers were all asleep as he passed through the saloon and reached the doctor's cabin. He was just undressing as he opened the door to his visitor's knock.

"You!" he cried in surprise. "Anything the matter? I have not long left Richards. He's gone."

"Dead?"

"Dead."

"I should like to see him, after all. Your description has taken a strange hold of me. Can I?"

Dr. Harrow raised his eyebrows. "Well," he answered, "of course you can, if you wish. Come on; I don't suppose they've moved him yet."

The two men went silently down through the stifling darkness of the lower decks till they reached the little three-cornered cupboard called the hospital. There, stretched on a pallet under the yellow light of a swinging lantern, lay the dead cook's assistant, the lines graven by excess already smoothed out by Death's leveling touch, and something of its solemn beauty had fixed itself on the chiselled features. The long, rigid figure, outlined under a coarse blanket, was almost too long for the straitened room.

"Depend upon it," the doctor murmured, as he stood looking down on the dead man, "that poor chap had a history. He was never born to die like this."

Mr. Vernon said never a word. At the first glance, he recognized his step-brother, and he felt neither shock nor surprise, but

rather a sense of pleasure. Richard lay before him, of that there could be no possible doubt; yet the likeness to his father was so strong that it seemed to Mr. Vernon he was actually beholding his father again. Nor could he feel the slightest unkindness, because of the resemblance. It was literally a shield to the memory of the vagabond. The good man's visage looked from the bad man's, and made it impossible to cherish anger. Mr. Vernon only thought how they had the same father—"we be children of one father"; only remembered the same home had sheltered them; while scenes of their boyhood, long overlooked during the busy intervening life-work, came thronging to his memory, making him quite unconscious of his companion, who, looking from the dead to the living, and reading plainly there the stamp of kindred, so much clearer since the earth's stains had disappeared, waited patiently for an explanation.

Mr. Vernon started when he at last remembered he was not alone, but he offered no confidence. "Poor fellow!" he only said, as he turned to leave the little room. Then, when they were back on the upper deck, he bade a terse "Good-night," and went away to his cabin.

When the body of "Richards—cook's assistant," was slung off the ship, and consigned to the ineffable calm of the ocean-bed, a few of the passengers were present, curious to witness the ceremony. Mr. Vernon was one of them, and it chanced that he was pushed forward so near to the body that he stood where the dead man's nearest relation would have stood under happier circumstances. The doctor was not there, nor was there anyone to comment on the coincidence. Mr. Vernon had made up his mind not to mention the matter again to Dr. Harrow. If he told anything, he must tell all; and he would not like it to get about that his boys' uncle was a nameless vagabond. Let the surgeon think what he chose, he could be sure of nothing. He managed to learn from the steward that Richards had left nothing behind him by which his former life could be traced.

"A fine figure of a man, sir," the steward added, "but a rare bad 'un. He's better gone than kept."

A verdict which was, alas! too true.

CHAPTER XXIV

A WELCOME

"Of all the swelliest swells, mother, you are the swelliest," was George's greeting, as he handed his mother out of the train at St. Pancras Station, the day she was to meet her husband. "We shall be taken for bride and bridegroom. Where did you get such a fashionable turn-out?"

She blushed as she met his approving and admiring gaze.

"Ah, I've been a dowdy so long," she replied; "but I don't want to disgrace your father. But I don't look too smart, do I?"

"Smart isn't the name," he said, as they left the station together in a hansom cab. "You look a fashionable lady, as you ought to look, that's all. Father won't know you!"

"Won't he?" she cried, laughing softly at the notion.

"I mean," he continued, "you look so much jollier and younger, you know. You were very yellow, when you came home; of course you were, and you looked much older than you do now. Why, you are all roses and lilies, dear, now. You see, if father doesn't think, when he first sees us, that I've stolen a march on him, and brought my bride to meet him!"

George was by no means so jovial as his manner implied. He had come to escort his mother to the docks, according to her request; but he was not anxious to receive the cold looks from his father which he felt awaited him, and yet determined neither father nor mother should suppose he expected either cold looks or annoying words. He kept talking as they rattled along, asking questions and evincing interest in every little home detail. "Was Harold behaving better? Was Arthur stronger? Who was looking after him? Why hadn't she brought him with her?" etc.

His mother satisfied him on these matters. She had no thought of his nervousness. There was no cloud on her sunny sky; indeed, for the moment her whole being was concentrated on the termination of the drive which should bring her face to face with her husband once more.

"*Harold has quite changed,*" she said. "*He never teases his*

brother now; and Toby was quite happy to be left. The journey and noise and bustle would not have suited him. The two boys were going to have their dinner in the summer-house, and when Harold was at school, Toby would be with the cook. He was very fond of making what he called 'chupatties,' and cook was very good to him. She could leave them with the greatest comfort."

Mr. Vernon was not a likely man to cloud his first greeting to his son, and his heavy grip of George's hand, and smiling eyes as he exclaimed at the young man's growth, showed George he need not fear the cold shoulder yet, at all events. How could anger, or even the faintest shadow of anger, be looked for in that moment of reunion?

"Why, Amy," he said, as he kissed her, though they stood in a crowd, "I saw you from the first, but didn't recognize you. I wondered what lucky fellow you'd come to meet. I must go straight away to Poole, and get rid of my jungly clothes, before I can show myself beside you. It's very evident my absence has agreed with you."

George collected his father's things, hustled him and his wife into the cab, and remained behind to give up the keys of the trunks to the custom officers, promising to be at St. Pancras later on, to see them off by train.

"What a handsome fellow he has grown!" Mr. Vernon said as they drove to the tailor's. "He's exactly like you."

"No," she cried, with both her hands clasped round his arm. "He's your living image—height, too!"

"No; he's taller than I; a better figure, too. And no one ever called me handsome."

"He's half an inch shorter than you, I'm sure, for I measured; and he's stouter than you; not so graceful. And you are fishing for compliments, and I shan't satisfy you."

For answer he bent over and kissed her, though they were driving in a crowded thoroughfare, in a hansom, too, and the cabby at that moment had opened the little door in the roof, and was gazing down on them.

It was an awkward situation. Cabby merely asked a question as to which route they preferred. His ideas of etiquette were not against public caresses. Mr. Vernon laughed when he had answered the question, and the little door was closed again.

"*I shall soon remember I am no longer in the wilds,*" he said, *laughing at her crimson cheeks.*

George was at the station when his parents drove up. Mr. Vernon had adorned himself with a new dust coat to cover his old-fashioned garments, and wore a shining top hat. An air of authority had become second nature to him. Porters flew at his word, guards were all obsequiousness. George, with his increased experience, looked on, and saw him in a new light. The dignified manner; the clear voice, uttering decided, terse orders; the tall, upright figure with its calm, slow movement among the hurrying, fussing, indeterminate crowd, showed him to be master of himself. "Engaged" was put on a *coupé*. The Burra Sahib had not yet been long enough in England as "nobody" to travel third class with a lady in charge. The bell had rung twice, Mrs. Vernon was comfortably seated, but her husband remained on the platform.

The guard touched his hat. "It's time you jumped in, sir, please, sir," he said, with smiling urbanity, as he held the carriage door wide open, and when he closed it on him it was with a noiseless ease never practised but for the benefit of the upper ten. "Now, young man," he added, in quite a different tone, as George went close to the train for a last word with his mother, "stand off; time's hup."

"A helderly bridegroom with very good taste," a porter said to a fellow-porter at George's elbow, nodding at the disappearing *coupé*.

"Oh, he's a lord, you bet," was the rejoinder.

Neither of them supposed George was other than a hanger-on.

"By your leave," rang in his ears as a trunk made toward him.

As he walked away, his mind was full of admiration of his father. He thought of him as of his own very far superior; as a man to be feared as well as loved. Remembering that angry letter which had poohed George's desires, fear came first. Even in his thoughts, his father was "sir" to him; while Will, though he had seen the pomp and state surrounding the Burra Sahib on occasion, could jest with and tease his father almost as he teased and jested with his brother officers. Will piled up the respect on great public occasions, but he took it out in private. It was this boyish confidence and equality which probably charmed the older man, and made him judge his faults more leniently than he judged George's.

So the newly reunited pair sped on toward Cotley, too happy to talk very connectedly, too self-engrossed to remark on the changes which had taken place since they parted. By tacit consent *weighty matters were kept in abeyance*; on such a day they would

see no shadows. Harold's improved conduct was dwelt upon; the little boys would not be at the station; Amy did not know by which train she would return; they were to have a feast at tea time in Fabian's summer-house; they would be best waiting at home.

So they sat looking at each other with clasped hands, clinging as hands cling only when they have been long sundered. Life with them was at its brightest; the day's work was finished for him; he had come home; there need be no further parting till one of them must cross another water whence there could be no return. Not that either of them just then realized any possible further separation; indeed, they realized little beyond the very simple and evident fact that they were once more together as of old. And in this atmosphere of bliss they ended their journey, and drove up to their own door.

There was the peaceful side lawn, with its rainbow-colored bordering of flowers, backed up by flowering shrubs and trees in their early summer foliage, out of which the quaint, grotesque joss-house reared itself; and there on the lawn were the little brothers, on whom the father's eyes fixed themselves full of surprise and pleasure at their growth and sturdiness.

At the first glance they seemed to be unconscious of the new arrivals, for they remained standing at a little distance from each other, as if acting a part, Toby's left arm extended, Harold's arms both raised, and before Mr. and Mrs. Vernon had quite realized what they were doing, a sharp report rang out, and Toby, uttering a loud scream, fell!

Then a terrible shriek from Harold followed, a cry so full of pain and horror that the agonized parents, as they darted toward the fallen child, almost stopped to intercept the other as he came toward them. But he made no effort for their sympathy, and father and mother forgot him for the moment while they attended to his brother.

Poor Toby was more frightened than hurt. One of his little fingers had been shot through; and when that was bound up, he was able to explain how the accident happened.

Harold had hidden George's gunpowder, and they thought it would be grand to show papa how clever they were. Harold had offered Toby a new threepenny-bit, if he would act William Tell's little boy, and stand with an orange on his head to be shot at, when papa drove in. Toby had promised, but at the last dare not perform his promise, so had compromised to hold the orange on a

fork, which he rightly considered would be a less dangerous proceeding, and still prove the accuracy of Harold's aim.

Harold had used a rusty old Chinese musket—the wonder was it had not burst. There it lay, as the boy had thrown it. It had been crammed with powder and small shot. The audacious ignorance of the whole affair blanched the poor father's face.

"It must have hurt the fellow as he fired," Mr. Vernon cried, holding the old-fashioned musket gingerly as he spoke. "Where is he?"

Toby was happy in his mother's arms; he had convinced himself he was not dead yet, and had understood nothing of the dread in Harold's cry; but as the mother watched the smiles and color back again in her little boy's cheeks, she remembered that tone, and became all at once anxious about his brother.

"Don't frighten him, dear William," she said, as her husband left the room to look for him. "You will do more with him by kindness than harshness, and he may be hurt, too."

"I won't be angry," he said; "but he must be made to understand wrong isn't right, under any circumstances."

However, at present Harold was not to be found; he had taken himself off the premises, at all events; and after convincing himself of that, Mr. Vernon went back to his wife.

By this time Toby was recovered enough to be rather boastful. "I promised Harold," he said, "not to move, not even if father rode into the garden on a white elephant, with a tiger instead of a dog. 'If father calls me,' I said, 'to have a ride, too, I won't move till you've shot my orange, Harry, dear, and then I'll have the thre'penny to buy mammy a birthday present.' I'm glad Harold didn't practise first, or perhaps I shouldn't have a finger left. He dursn't practise, you know, 'fraid of being heard by the servants."

When they had dined, and Toby was in bed, Mrs. Vernon wished Harold would return, that his punishment and forgiveness might be got over. She and her husband paced the garden together, listening to every passing footstep, and every now and then watching the road on either hand; but the gloaming fell, and the brightness faded from the sky, and the lawn became too dewy to be walked upon, and still there was no penitent. When nine o'clock struck from the town churches, Amy grew very nervous. She would not leave the gate for an instant, and as the darkness deepened, and shadows increased, she fancied the child hiding

near, and called to him persuasively and encouragingly. Mr. Vernon had no fears then; he was sure the boy was all right and safe, probably had already come in across the fields from the back, and was in his bed. But then she told him the field pathway had long since been built in—he could reach the house in no other manner than through the front gate. Would he go and convince himself he had not returned?

He went, and came back quickly, bringing a warm shawl for his wife. No, the room was empty; and by and by, as the stillness and darkness grew, and ten o'clock and half-past ten rang faintly through the odorous summer night, and still Harold was absent, he, too, became seriously anxious, and decided to go in search of him. But where to go? Grandmother and aunt were absent; there was no refuge open to him in Great Street—the old house was shut and empty. He had no particular friend able to take him in or likely to take part with him against his parents. It could not be supposed for a moment that one of the masters would harbor him secretly. But where could he be? Once more the house was searched, the joss-house unlocked and locked up empty again. With a lantern the garden was gone through, but without any result except arousing clouds of insects. Amy stood with colorless face, and eyes full of despair.

"We must go and look for him," she said. "You shall go one way, I will go another. We must find him somewhere."

"I'll go," her husband replied. "You must go and lie down."

"Lie down!" As if she could lie down in rest when her boy was missing. She would not say so, but in her heart was the dread that he had thrown himself in the river; and her one desire was to run down to the embankment. It had come to her in the hours of waiting that he must have believed he had killed his brother—the horror in his cry seemed to say so—and in his unreasoning, childish terror he had drowned himself to be rid of the fear. If only the idea had reached her sooner! And now the time had gone by, and only his dead body could be recovered. .

Mr. Vernon understood enough to judge it would be cruel to leave her, so he let her accompany him in the weary walk to the police station, where he determined to give the alarm. When that was done and the anxious couple stood in the quiet solitary High Street, she breathed her awful suspicion.

"Let us go to the embankment."

"Why, do you think we shall find him asleep on one of the benches?"

"No; he may be drowned." She clung to his arm as she spoke, her whole frame in agony.

"Oh, my dear love!" he rejoined, "you must not think that. Why should you? Has he ever shown any sign of such rashness?"

"No, no; but, O Will, his cry as he ran away! He may fancy Toby was killed. Poor little fellow! he may think all sorts of terrible results to himself—he loves Toby."

She broke down, passionately weeping, tired out and exhausted.

He soothed her as only he could soothe her; but his own fears were strongly aroused.

"Come," he said, drawing her forward, "we will go round by the embankment, and knock up old Johnson; he is always on the river. If the boy went there when he left home, Johnson must have noticed him loitering about; he knows him. He taught him to swim, you know."

So on round the familiar town to the bridge, and the cluster of old houses by the boatman's, where they made old Johnson awake with difficulty. But there was no news of the missing. Johnson *had* been up and down all the evening, for it was a club night, and he had to coach the crews. He had not seen Harold, nor had Harold taken a boat—of that he was very sure.

Then they walked on up the embankment by the slowly gliding water—finding nothing to disturb its flow till it reached the swan's island, that divided it for a short space into two streams, which, murmuring at the obstacle, lapped the green sides with tinkling measure. The swan's white figures were visible among the dewy grass and bushes, and on the other bank, in the poplar-bordered meadows, cows were feeding—indistinct forms wreathed in a thin night mist. The seats were all empty, and as they passed each, Amy felt one more hope had vanished. From end to end of the raised walk they paced till the river, again released from its raised boundary, spread itself amid osier beds and rushes at its will, while the low meadow-land became half a swamp, and the king-cups and speckled orchids grew in profusion in the watery waste—then Mr. Vernon insisted on returning home.

"He may be at home by now," he urged, "and Arthur may be feverish and frightened. We can do no more; the police are searching everywhere. We are only risking our lives here in this *cold damp*."

Then her fears rose on her husband's account, as he had expected, and she hastened to return.

"Yes, he may be at home," she repeated, "and you—straight from India—oh, you ought not to be exposed to this night damp. Let us make haste and go back; it is dreadful here."

She glanced round, shivering. The water seemed to hurry as it reached the end of its banks, and with a swish of triumph rolled unchecked among the shadowy reeds, and under the alder bushes, till its brightness was lost in distance; it found its voice with its freedom, too, and its sound filled in the pauses of nightingales, who were ravishing the night with their sweet, strong melody. But to her there was neither beauty nor sweetness. She felt as if she and her husband were shadows in a shadow-land, wandering beside the river of death.

The eastern sky was radiant with the sun's approach as they reached their house again. Arthur was sleeping quietly; the servants—who had not been to bed—had no good news. The police inspector had been, but it was only to say he had heard nothing so far, and to ask if the child had returned. Then husband and wife looked at each other in the strengthening daylight, and wondered at each other's changed appearance. An early breakfast was prepared, and Mr. Vernon had a bath, and came down outwardly refreshed; but his wife could not sit down, much less go upstairs and refresh her poor tired-out body. She stood at the table and swallowed some food as a necessity, not as an enjoyment, going out between whiles to look again through the gate, or round the garden—her ears were quick to hear the slightest tread. She would have all the doors kept open, that no outward sound should be lost.

By and by, as the policemen came off night duty, messages arrived from the police station—no tidings. Mr. Vernon went off presently to consult about further steps—and his wife wished to go with him, but was obliged to confess her inability. So she stayed at home, listening, hoping, fearing.

The sunny morning, and Toby's appearance, rosy and smiling as usual, had some little cheering effect on her; the little boy's insensibility to anxiety for his missing brother astonished her.

"He has gone—none knows where," she explained.

"He's runned away," was the complacent rejoinder. "He'll *come back* some day, when he's Lord Mayor. Did he take any *luggage*?"

"O Toby, he may not have any food." Toby recognized none of the agony of her tone.

"He had a good tea," he said; "lots of tarts before you came. He mixed up jam and rhubarb, and sugar and cheese, cake and cream. He said it was lovely. He gave me a taste, but I didn't like it. I had halfpenny buns. Cook says I haven't such a good appetite as most boys."

"Go in, Toby," she said, "and pray for him. Pray that God will bring him safely back—quickly."

"Why don't you pray 'stead of me?"

"I have been praying all night," she said. "God would like you also to ask him to bring him back."

Toby ran off. When he returned, he had evidently forgotten all about Harold, for he was full of helping the gardener to dig up potatoes, and as soon as he had his mother's permission, he was off.

She was still leaning up against the front door watching when her husband came back. Telegrams had been sent to the police stations all round Cotley. "The boy was sure to be found wherever he was hiding now," Mr. Vernon assured her. The news had been spread through the town somehow. The head-master had met him, and many of the schoolboys had asked him if it was true. The rumor was that the elder boy had purposely shot his little brother dead. Everybody was excited; indeed, the general feeling was the same as that of the poor mother, that Harold had drowned himself in a fit of despair. This Mr. Vernon kept from his wife, though he told her the river was to be dragged that afternoon; and, strange to say, that satisfied her.

"She should at least be sure one way or the other, after that was done," she said. "She could bear anything, if only he were alive."

In the afternoon, George arrived in time to be present at the dragging of the river. The appearance of his mother, white, worn, and despairingly quiet, affected him profoundly. He had no pity for Harold, when he saw the havoc he had wrought in his father and mother. The dreadful contrast of their happiness but a few hours before with their present wretchedness changed all his anxiety into anger.

"Never fear," he said. "Naught's never in danger. I do hope you won't kill the fatted calf, when he turns up. A good stick is *what he must be treated with.*"

Mr. Vernon smiled. What a relief it was to hear this decided common-sense view of the matter! What a help this strong son was in this time of supreme dejection! While George went on citing similar cases which had all come under his experiences, but which had all ended happily, with the assistance of stick-law, at the end.

When he went off to watch the proceedings on the river, his parting words were, "I tell you this is mere waste of money. Master Harold is a great deal too fond of himself to do himself any harm."

The father remained with the mother, waiting with a dread they would not speak of. Toby ran in and out quite happy, hardly noticing their solemnity, and quite indifferent to their hushed voices, when his continual questions brooked no delay in answering.

"Cook's crying! Why does she cry, eh?" or, "They won't give my kitten plenty to eat. Mayn't it have plenty to eat, eh?" And so on, extracting monosyllables in reply now and then; but generally content to do all the talking alone. It recalled to their memories sad days in India when they had sat thus together in speechless sorrow after the death of their little girls. Once or twice Amy went out round the lawn by the bushes, and so on to the gate; but she was becoming too much exhausted to repeat that often, and each time she came back it was borne in upon her that utter prostration must soon overpower her. A footstep in the road, a ring at either front or back door almost stopped the beating of her heart; and when at last in the early evening George came back from what had proved to be an unsuccessful search, she felt neither relief nor conviction, her senses were losing their power to act, and both husband and son rejoiced when all at once mind was mastered by matter, and she fell back on the sofa in a death-like sleep.

It was positive relief to escape the anguish of her eyes. Mr. Vernon would not have her moved, for fear of disturbing her. So Toby was banished to the far-off kitchen; and while George went to the police station, to consult and to plan new modes of hearing of the runaway, his father kept watch at home.

CHAPTER XXV

AND ITS RESULT

WHEN Harold saw his little brother drop to the ground, he firmly believed himself to be a murderer, and his first thought was to escape from punishment. As he turned to fly, he saw the expression of his mother's face, and it lent swiftness to his flight. He had no thought for his father, to whose coming he had been so eagerly looking; no idea of where he could hide. Only one thought possessed him—that he was as Cain, and that every man's hand henceforth would be against him.

To get out of sight of home, never to see anyone who knew him again, was his one desire; and, goaded by it, he ran across country, stumbling over drain cuttings, splashing through reed-beds, avoiding roads and cottages, and never once looking behind, till at last, completely out of breath, he reached the shelter of a little spinny or copse, where, out of sight and reach of human eyes and hands, he threw himself down among the leaves of many an autumn and rested.

"Poor little Toby!" he whispered, as the silence around him became unbearable. "If only he had held it steady, he'd have been all right now. And what will father do with our presents? Oh, what will mother do without Toby?"

Then he wondered where he should pass the night, and the thought of being all alone through the night out-of-doors frightened him, though he was not a coward. He had a vivid imagination, and it did not befriend him in his need; it pictured the spinny full of fairies and elves—worse than that, of wild cats, badgers, and wild boars. He was not quite sure whether eagles ever came so far south; but it was just likely one might come and peck out his eyes; bulls, too, he had heard were allowed to roam at night. What chance had he against such awful company? and already the sun was sinking.

This was indeed retribution's hour; it had been such fun to draw on his imagination to terrify Arthur. How silly the little fellow had been when giants and wild animals had been described

ready to attack him, even in his happy sheltered home. What a clever fellow Harold had thought himself to be able to blanch the soft cheeks and make the innocent eyes darken. But he was being paid back now in his own coin; and as the country sounds came to him, and strange cracklings and rustlings were audible all round him, he experienced something of the expectant horror he had so often made Arthur feel.

Never before had he seen daylight go so quickly, never before had he seen such deep shadows lurk under the hedges; the very breeze had notes altogether sadder and stranger than he had ever before heard. The barking of dogs on distant farmsteads were alarming, inasmuch as, instead of sounding at the same distance, they now seemed increasing, as if coming nearer; and, if so, he knew they must be bloodhounds—those undeviating criminal-hunters, whose services he had often pressed into the blood-curdling narratives reserved for younger companions. Either bulls or bloodhounds were undesirable visitors; and he wondered whether, in the event of being tracked by one or other, death by being tossed or gored, or death by being bitten through and through, would be worst or best. He soon determined to try to escape both; and obeying the instinct of self-preservation, he once more ran out into the open and made for the highroad, meaning to keep on the field side till he would feel secure in the darkness of night. There was some feeling of security in hearing the rattle of wheels once more. Presently a county policeman rode by, and for a long time after he had gone out of hearing the boy shivered in the hedge bottom. Was he looking for him, he wondered? Had he been sent out to catch him alive or dead, to bring him to justice? These very words called up a vision of himself standing in the court guarded by policemen. He conjured up the judge putting on a black cap and ordering his execution. He wondered whether his father and mother would kiss him before he was hanged, and whether they would be allowed to bury him properly, or whether a quicklime grave was considered part of the punishment. How he wished he had never stopped to look at that horrible *Police News*, with its revolting pictures and sickening details; then his mind would not be so full of it all now. He decided he would ask to say a few words before he was taken out of the dock to be hanged. He remembered he had read about certain criminals having such a privilege granted, and he would advise the Court to have the *Police News* abolished, for it had enabled him to frighten

poor little Toby, when ghosts and giants fell flat sometimes. By this time the dew was very heavy, and the damp chill brought him back to the uncomfortable present. He was wearing thin serge knickerbockers and a white jacket, the ordinary summer suit of a boy of his age, and he began to wish for a warm room or a warm coat. How was he to endure this cold through the long night?

In returning to the highroad, he had come again nearer the town, a disagreeable fact of which he was not aware till he heard the clocks. Dread of meeting a town policeman now possessed him, for they all knew him as well as he knew them, and he dared not go out into the dry road, nor would he retreat again among the fields, remembering the hoarse barking which had frightened him away. There was nothing for him then but to remain in the friendly safety of the hedge bottom, damp as it was, and though he could not keep himself from shivering. Then, when the clocks had struck eleven and twelve, and the silence and loneliness of the road had been unbroken for more than an hour, the little fellow's endurance gave way. It was to him as if heaven's gate was closed against him, and of father, mother, and brothers, no one of them would ever be seen again. He cried as he had never cried before; all his assumed manhood and hardness giving way as he whispered entreaties to his father and mother to love him still; and as his tears at last ceased, from very inability to shed more, he heard a nightingale in a thorn tree, not a stone's-throw from where he sat, flood the silent air with her trill of ecstasy. While it sang, Harold felt nothing but delight—no longer alone and forsaken. God had sent him "melody in his heaviness," and the child, while listening with delighted ears, was calmed and comforted. Again and again the prolonged note of liquid sweetness sounded attention to the torrent of bravura that followed, each clear half-note round and full and sweet, in a very cataract of perfect melody. When she had flown away he felt strengthened, and for a short time forgot the aching of his chilled limbs in listening to the faint song continued in the distance. When that, too, had ceased to reach his ears, the stillness filled him with fresh dread. He felt that if he remained much longer he would be paralyzed. What would he have given for the safe shelter of home, for the sound of the home voices? What was to become of him to-morrow and to-morrow night?

Hunger as yet had not troubled him; but when he climbed out of the ditch, and passed into the road, it began to give him new

distress. He stood for a while in the road, trying to pierce the darkness and recognize the locality; but all looked strange and forbidding. No houses were near, only deserted fields and market gardens; on either hand the dusty road stretched in vague, shadowy solitude. The town drew him at length; he could not make himself go further into the unknown, whereas, though the familiar houses were shut against him, he knew at least they held peaceful human beings; the very outsides were sufficient to make him feel protected. Thus he came within the shelter of the town; but how altered! no busy passers-by, no frantic butcher boys dashing round corners, no gay shop fronts; but, instead, utterly empty and silent and obscured streets, shuttered houses, soundless abodes of sleep, and he alone, of all its thousands, wandering in the gloom. What was he to do next? If he waited for the light he would be recognized; there were very few people in Cotley who were unacquainted with the Vernon boys; the very first milkman would probably be the man who supplied his milk, the very first policeman would most certainly know him. He might sit down in the largest of these old-fashioned doorways and escape all possible vigilance while the darkness lasted; but the deepest porch of all would fail to hide him in the searching light of day. Then he bethought him of the deserted house in Great Street—that second home, whose cupboards had once held choice dainties kept exclusively for him and Toby. He was inclined to cry as he pictured his grandmother fretting over Toby's death, and her love for himself turning to horror, and wondered whether he should ever see her again. The old house was the casket of that old life which seemed already so far behind him. He would not feel so utterly lonely if he could hide himself in one of its outhouses; possibly he might find a door, forgotten to be locked, which would admit him into the house itself. There he might hide and plan through the day till he decided what to do next. Stealthily creeping on the darkest side of the street, he therefore went toward Great Street, now and then startled by a cat jumping from a garden wall, once hiding to escape a policeman, whose sounding footsteps gave him ample notice of his approach; but at last finding himself in the lonesome, dimly lighted place, close to the tall house with its blank dark windows.

The gate into the stable yard was not locked, and he felt safe *when he was inside*. The inner door leading from the yard to the *back premises*, however, was fastened, but he had no trouble in

climbing that, and then he stood in the almost pitch-dark garden. As his eyes became accustomed to the light from the sky only, he noticed the well-known shrubs and flower-beds, the corner shed painted with tar, the steps leading from the loaded balcony outside the library window, and he went from the kitchen entrance to the hall door vainly seeking admission; but he was fain at last to seat himself on the top of the garden steps. All was quiet around him. It was the dark hour before dawn, when the very cats are quiet, and the child was thoroughly worn out. Tender thoughts of his little brother possessed him, intense longing for his mother, bitter yearning for a kind voice, a warm touch, and a desperate longing to ask forgiveness. That last desire brought comfort; he could ask forgiveness and help—he could pray. His tears fell fast as he knelt up and said his evening prayers, uttering the words with a new sense and a new conviction of their meaning and their comfort. The holy words brought peace, and the tears relieved him. He sat down again and laid his head against the hard iron palisading, and before another quarter chimed from the church clock he had found in sleep a temporary rest from all his trouble.

The warm western sun was shining full upon him when he at last awoke, and remembered how he came there, and why; and, as he rose and rubbed his stiffened legs, a sense of hunger, not to be set aside, assailed him, and filled his mind to the exclusion of all beside. He tried a draught of water at the pump, and for a time it satisfied him; but it was evident, even to his childish mind, that he must get food somehow, or he would die. He was a strong healthy boy, and could fast with as little impunity as any boy of his age; but he had passed through torments of mental distress as well as great bodily fatigue, and the double strain was beyond his powers of endurance. The sun's warmth and brightness, and the busy street sounds, all heartened him for the time; but he had slept far into the afternoon, and as the time went on, and he could think of no possible way of obtaining food without money, even if he should dare to show himself at a shop, his head became light with the intensity of his perplexity.

He dozed again, now and then starting up at the rattle of wheels in the narrow street beyond the garden wall, or opening his eyes suddenly, after a moment's unconsciousness, and fancying he saw a face looking at him from behind the shed. Fortunately for him, *he had not known how his uncle Richard had hidden there, and*

passed hours in the very tree close by, or the terror of that memory would have been more than he could have borne.

As his hunger pressed, he considered the desirability of giving himself up to the police for the sake of prison food and protection. He shrank from another night coming on such as the past. Surely a cell and a cup of warm gruel was better than another such a time; indeed, so desirable this course seemed that he longed for twilight to fall to enable him to climb out of the garden unseen, and reach the police station without being recognized in public. His misery was very great. Many a naughty action, many an angry word, many a mean act, came to his recollection, as if arraigning him, as he cowered in the solitude dreading detection, and, as many a grown-up person has done before him, he wondered at his wrong-doing, and resolved against continuing in it if only God would give him another trial. Yet when the gloaming fell, and the traffic was over, and the children at play in the streets gradually ceased to shout, and he could safely venture out under cover of the darkness, his bodily weakness kept him back. He drank more water, and that appeased him sufficiently to enable him to climb safely into the stable yard, and so reach the outer gate. He listened before he raised the latch and ventured outside; but, as usual, no one was about, and with some degree of pleasure to be released from his solitary confinement, he took his way, slowly enough and wearily enough, in the direction of the police station.

He rested for a few moments in the area of an empty house, and while so doing he heard two policemen pass by with a drunken man. This turned him from his intention of surrendering himself. Might he not be put in the same cell with this cursing, violent, drunken beast of a man? Poor Harold's ideas of prison life were very vague. Death from want and exposure was preferable, he thought, to being locked up with or near this shameful drunkard. And when he had crawled up again to the street, he reversed his steps and set out again with his face toward the open country, hardly conscious that he was going in the direction of home, until he suddenly recognized he was in the familiar road, and could, but for the darkness, see the gilded spike of Fabian's joss-house amid the larch trees of his own garden.

As soon as he knew where he was, he broke into a run, which *carried him* beyond the furthest house in the road, where the *gas-lights* ceased and fields and plantations bordered the highway.

Here he sank down, completely done for, afraid of his nearness to his home, afraid of the lightness of his head and the sickness which was coming over him. The terrors of the past night, intensified by his bodily exhaustion, all overtook him again. Toby's scream came back over and over again; his mother's startled face gleamed above him. He lost consciousness for a time, and recovered once more, aching with cold, soaked in dew, with the horror of a great darkness blotting out his surroundings.

He staggered to his feet, only remembering that he was not far from home, from his soft warm bed, from food and light. There was no further question of advisability; he *must* go home; must ask forgiveness, and be loved once more, and then he would let himself die.

So he went back feebly with swimming brain, and feet that did not feel the ground on which they trod, till he stood again at the garden gate. Then for some time he hesitated; his mind was rapidly loosening its hold; all was so still and dark, he felt as if he alone walked the earth, while all else had perished. Time had ceased to be; he was surely a shade groping in the dark.

Then faintly there came to him the striking of a clock—one, two. He counted the strokes with some vague sense of relief. The night was passing; the summer's morning would rise before long, as usual, and the thought brought no terror. Let it come and detect him; he would go and die on the doorstep; they would see him, and take him in, and be sorry for him. With an effort he pushed the gate open, taking care to do it noiselessly, and to reach the grass border, that his steps should not be heard as he struggled onward to the front door. Once there, he forgot his crime, its punishment, disgrace, everything; he was near all he cared for again; his terrors were all obliterated—he was at home.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE STEP-MOTHER

WHEN the last report from the police had been received, finding Amy still slept, her husband and son both sought rest also. George had no difficulty in courting it; but his father only nodded at intervals, blaming himself even for that momentary oblivion.

Though the river had been dragged, he felt by no means sure the boy was not in its depths somewhere, and the prolonged uncertainty of his fate was becoming intolerable; and while Mr. Vernon rested his body, his head was hard at work surmising, dreading, planning fresh ways of search. Mrs. Vernon woke soon after midnight; the sleep had quite restored her, she said, and she ate and drank with some degree of appetite.

"I have been dreaming," she said, "of seeing him at your mother's. I found him asleep on Aunt Jane's bed; he was all right. It has made me feel so happy. What did the inspector say?"

"He is not found yet. They have no clue whatever."

"Do you know why I am eating and drinking in this heartless way?" she continued. "As soon as it is light, I shall go to Great Street. He very likely went there to hide. You know he is not afraid of ghosts or anything silly like that. I shall be quite able to walk; and I shall bring him home before people are about to see us."

Her husband looked fixedly at her. Was she delirious? he thought.

She smiled as she guessed his idea. "I am all right, indeed," she said. "I feel quite strong with the sleep and food. I wonder we did not go to the old house at once. Of course he would go there; it would be the likeliest place."

"But how would he get in? Isn't it all locked up?"

Her countenance fell. "Oh, he is so small," she added. "He would find a window open, it is most likely; a window would be left open for ventilation, you know; but there is no bed, no furniture, only the bare, hard boards—the poor little fellow!"

"The bare, hard boards," thought the father. "Was it likely the child had anything so comfortable?"

"Ah, well," he said aloud, "we can but hope. But now will you try and sleep again till daylight comes?"

"Have you slept?"

"A little."

"O Will, dear Will, you have watched me, and taken no care of yourself! How selfish I have been! How tired you must be! how gray you look! Come over here, dear, and pray for us and for him; that will help us more than any police can."

He crossed over and knelt by her sofa, while he uttered some *heartfelt* words of pleading; then they sat together in sorrow,

which was too deep for words, till the dawn came through the drawn blinds and made the lamplight yellow.

Mr. Vernon rose and extinguished the lamp, and drew up the blinds, and flung up the window, letting in the sweet, comforting air of morning and the sound of cuckoo and thrushes.

Amy rose too. "Let me go now," she said; "and you, dear, lie down till I return." She could not add "with him"; the certainty of finding him in Great Street was already weakened.

"No," he replied, "I cannot let you go; but I will go. You surely can trust me to search as diligently as you would."

Perhaps she was convinced of her inability to carry out her purpose, for now she was standing she felt her weakness. At all events, she agreed to stay behind, if only he would lose no time in returning.

She accompanied him to the front door, to close it quietly upon him, for all the house was still sleeping. Mr. Vernon opened it, and was passing out, when he uttered an exclamation, and made way for his wife at his side. She darted forward, her mother's instinct guessing at once what that exclamation meant. At their feet there, just within the porch, huddled up in a heap the lost boy lay—dirty, pinched, deathlike; and Amy, falling on her knees beside him, tried to gather him up in vain.

When George, wakened by the stir, came on the scene, the anger he had cherished against his brother gave place to deepest regret. It is one thing to advise, another thing to act. The sight of the white face, livid with cold and hunger, disarmed all his vexation, as his father carried the boy, still unconscious, upstairs; and father and mother, together, took off the wet, clinging clothes, and wiped away the stains from the rigid face and hands. He believed death had already struck him, but the mother had no such fear; she became practical and helpful at once. All her dread had gone to the winds; and while her eyes were fixed on her recovered boy, she could try all that was possible to restore him. As the color came slowly back to the child's cheeks, so hers kindled into bloom, and as the child's eyes slowly opened, and expressed a sense of knowing where he was, so hers flashed into ecstasy.

When the doctor arrived, all had been done that could be done; he could prescribe nothing for the patient but perfect quiet. It was Toby who, after all, was the best doctor. He had come to the bedside before Harold had moved or spoken or shown any *symptoms of life beyond that one raising of the eyes*; and when Dr.

Pritchard left the room, Toby put his rosy lips to his brother's, cooing over him as if he were a pigeon. In an instant Harold raised himself, his eyes wide open, his face aglow with glad surprise; and the little one, intuitively grasping the situation, pointed to his cradled arm, and cried—"It wasn't nothing, Harry; only my fingers were killed a little. It was all my fault, you know. Why did you run away?"

Years afterward, when Harold told this incident, he always said he had a foretaste of heaven when all terror was taken from him by Arthur's embrace; and, indeed, it was the turning-point in his character, though it was years before he understood why he needed so severe a lesson. He was a long time recovering his health, and his return to school was a bitter trial. He had to endure sneers and jibes. He had to see unfriendly glances, and, worst of all, he had lost by his absence so much work that his place, instead of being at the head of his class, was necessarily near the bottom, and extra study was forbidden him for that term at least. But there was sympathy at home which prevented him from becoming moody and revengeful. Sympathy and encouragement—two things which cost nothing to bestow; and yet too often are withheld, as if too valuable and costly for home consumption.

Old Mrs. Vernon would not remain away as soon as she knew her son was in England. She had taken a small, old-fashioned house just outside the town—the house to which Gertrude had gone as a bride, and wherein her brief married life was passed. It had since been occupied by a careful tenant, and kept in such order that the pretty wallpapers Gertrude had chosen were but slightly mellowed by time. The pretty garden was still as she and her husband had planned it; the shrubs and trees they had planted together were only in their early prime. Directly Mrs. Vernon knew it was to let, she had mentioned her wish to take it to Amy; but they both feared the trial for Gertrude. She had, however, found out their doubts, and at once put them aside. Nothing could please her more, she declared, than to be at home again in the rooms full of happy memories; it would be doubly home to her, and she would allow no further delay about taking it. But her first visit to it was made alone. She got the key, and locked herself in while she interviewed the past. Few people "get over" the loss of one who has been as their own soul; but time takes away the bitterness of the void, though it never refills it. Gertrude stood in the little room which had been her husband's study, and pictured it as it

then was—the laden bookshelves, the table heaped with papers, the files of manuscript on the floor; an old terrier full length before the hearth, the photographs of his home, his college, his school and college friends; his girl-wife's likeness on his open desk beside his mother's and father's; the pipe-rack full of every species of pipe; the gay tobacco-jar; the cricket and tennis gear. She replaced each and all as they had been, and most of all, she replaced him as he sat with smiling face turned to her, the slender handsome young husband, and read no warning in his bright dark eyes and long, thin hands—read only that he loved her as she loved him, and that a long, happy life stretched before them. The syringa outside the window looked in on her loneliness as it had looked in on her bliss. Was it possible, she asked herself, that she could bury that happy past, and go to another husband and live in his smiles and caresses? She smiled in her sadness at the thought. No; the gay girl-wife died when the young husband and his baby boy died. The sober, elderly woman, who was going to marry the sober, elderly man, had little to do with that happy girl; just as the cooling air, as the sun creeps over the western horizon, has little in common with the radiant heat which spreads from its morning uprisal. Then she went into the garden, and gathered a nosegay, kissing each flower as she adjusted it, and in the twilight she locked the empty casket of her dead life, and carried the flowers to his grave, kissing his name on the already discolored stone as she laid her offering upon it.

People said they wondered how Mrs. Lancing had the heart to go back to the little house, and how she could bear to listen to the wedding-bells pealing over the churchyard where her poor husband lay! There were other people who wondered how Mr. Marleon liked to give his poor girls a step-mother. Has it not always been the same? "The heart knoweth his own bitterness; and a stranger doth not intermeddle with his joy." Gertrude took an honest, unselfish heart to her new husband, though its volcanoes were extinct, and her step-daughters believed themselves the happiest of girls to have her for a step-mother.

Their wedding was a very different affair to that of the Trumans. Several relatives of Mrs. Lancing insisted on being wedding-guests. There were old friends, also, in Cotley who could not be left out—relations, too, of Mr. Marleon, and relations of the girls, who were anxious to see for themselves what sort of a new mother "the poor dear children" were likely to have. There

were old Indian friends, too—notably the Holroyds. So, although neither bridesmaids nor groomsmen were permissible, the great church presented a very gay spectacle. The girls were dressed according to their own wish, as like bridesmaids as possible—in fact, George declared they only wanted the name of the thing to be the thing. George himself invested in a new suit of such a worldly cut and style that Urania inquired how he ever expected to wear it out in the wilds of Australia? while Titania suggested it was a speculation, to let it out for a consideration to bush bridegrooms just for the wedding ceremony. George said, No, he should put it by in lavender till his own turn came; to which Titania rejoined he'd have to look quick, for he could not wear it at all after he became a parson. George protested he had not thought of that or he would not have gone to such an expense. He could, however, give it as a wedding-present to Will, if the latter should make up his mind within a reasonable time.

Onlookers told each other it was easy to see Titania and George were to be the next. Onlookers don't always see the most of the game. The poor woman in her grave, the mother of the smiling girls, had never been kissed as the step-mother was kissed when she was leaving Cotley for her honeymoon.

"Dear, dear mamma," they said, looking at her lovingly, "come back to us as soon as you can, but enjoy yourself immensely; mind you do. Papa, you'll see she doesn't get cold or anything, won't you? Good-by, dear, darling mamma! Really mamma at last!"

So with the loving words of mother, brother, step-daughters, nephews, and innumerable friends sounding in her ears, the new Mrs. Marleon started on her second matrimonial venture.

A substantial tea to the poor, among whom she had faithfully worked for many years, marked her wedding-day as one of rejoicing to those who could give nothing again. Henceforth she was to give up parish work in the sense she had so long carried it on; but everyone understood that, while husband and daughters would have the first claim on her time, she would never forget the claims of the poor around her.

"No, no," one of the women said to George, as he handed her a sixth cup of tea; "she may ride in her carriage, and wear Injun filigree, but we baint afraid of being forgot, all the same. She's a Vernon all the same, and a Lancing all the same, and if this here new man of hers is anything like that pore dear young gentleman

as went off in the gallops, he'll let her think of us just the same, never fear."

Another feast was held at Mr. Vernon's later in the evening. The rooms could not accommodate all the guests, so a tent was spread over the tennis-courts for dancing; and, for sitting out, there was Fabian's garden-house and the pretty trellised walks, all scented with the summer flowers. Cotley had never known such a garden entertainment before, and the novelty was delightful, though many of the elders secretly provided themselves with galoches.

The dancers found no drawbacks. To Fanny Holroyd it was paradise. It was her first dance; and she told Mr. Steed, who was now a "'Varsity man," that she would like such an entertainment every night of the week, and was longing for the time to come when she should go to her aunt in Calcutta, where she believed people in the best society never did anything else but enjoy themselves.

Mr. Steed thought Commem. week beat everything. Would she come next year, and see for herself?

"He's a regular flirt!" Fanny told Tanny Marleon later on, with just the airs Flossy would have assumed.

Tanny said scornfully, "Who? that Steed creature? Oh, we don't care for him! Aunt Amy is so good; she's asked him for Dal's sake. But pray don't let him be familiar!"

George's friend, Mr. Lathom, was there. He had been asked especially that Mr. Vernon should see how worthy he was to be a guide and counsellor. Mr. Vernon had expected an æsthetic, priestly looking person, and had found a young man after his own heart. "A steady, practical, gentlemanly, cheerful fellow, safe to get on anywhere," he had told Amy. The Marleon girls had secretly dreaded his advent. Their preconceived ideas of his appearance had been as erroneous as Mr. Vernon's. Very stiff and prim had been their greetings when George introduced him; but they had grown friendly over the women's tea, and now, at the dance, they already felt like old friends.

Mr. Lathom had quickly discovered the attraction in Urania to George. They had waltzed together to the music of George's name and polked to the discussion of his colonial plans; and as they sat in the sheltered garden to recover breath, it was easy to find the way to the girl's regard by harping upon George's college honors, his self-defacement, his virtues, and his goodness generally.

He watched how her eyes shone as George came to claim her as his partner, and he stood silently, after they left him, alone in the shadow, asking himself how far he was to blame in putting a barrier between their lives. He had never thought of George as a lover, but now he saw how natural it was that he and Urania should be drawn together. He went and stood at the tent door, following them with his eyes, reading them as an open book. There was no doubt about it, he told himself. George's face had never softened before as it softened now. He wouldn't have believed the fellow could have looked "so sawny," but as he framed the contemptuous words he was angry with himself. Love, then, was a reality, an adornment, the sweet, natural blossom of youth; it was no fool's paradise, no mere simpering sentiment, but a reality, that beautified and raised poor human nature to sublime, unselfish deeds and heights, and *he* knew nothing of it. He sighed and turned away to argue the new idea out alone, but Amy spoke to him and he was obliged to attend to her and follow her as she led the way.

"Come and dance while you have the chance," she said. "George tells me you are going away this autumn." She took him up, introduced him to Fanny Holroyd, and that young lady enlightened him most confidently concerning her own family, the Marleons, and the Vernons. "Some of the Vernon boys are bound to marry some of the Marleon girls," she said.

"Some, or any, or one, or two in particular?" he asked, laughing.

"Oh, well, of course, one can see which it will be!—at least, I can, of course. George and Urania always kept together; and there's Dal and Constantia, and there's Titania, you know; but I'm not so sure whether she likes Fabian or Will most. You don't know Will, do you? He's such a good dresser, you know, and all that."

"I feel quite bashful," he said, "to discuss such delicate questions. But don't you think the brothers are rather too young to settle just yet?"

"Oh, dear me, no! Why, Will is twenty-five, and George nearly twenty-four!"

"You think them rather elderly, in fact?"

"Well, I think when a girl is past twenty, and a man past twenty-five, they'd better look out; don't you?"

Presently, when he was dancing with Titania, he said, "*Miss Holroyd told me you are her dearest friend.*"

"Fanny! Did she? Well, it was very nice of her to say so. We used to be together a great deal when we were very little."

He looked at her keenly, but there was no lurking sarcasm in her expression.

"She's very pretty, isn't she?" Titania continued, wishing to say something kind of her uncongenial friend.

"Oh, of course! All young ladies are 'very pretty.' Is beauty everything in your estimation?"

"Of course not." She spoke with some of her old schoolgirl decision, then added gently, "But I like beauty."

"That's honest," he replied. "So do I—so does everyone. But there are so many beauties; beauties of expression, of coloring, of feature and figure—of voice especially—of kindness and deeds." He was looking at her as he emphasized each point, as if appraising her, and she colored under his gaze. "It is best to see beauty everywhere," he added, as if he were offering a new idea to his own consideration. "But it is astonishing how we generally only look out for blemishes."

George and Urania stopped them at that instant. George asked his friend to dance with Fanny Holroyd.

"She was yawning just now," he added; "and it's her first dance."

"My dear fellow, we've just danced together. Haven't we?" he added to Titania.

"Yes, and he thinks her very pretty," Titania said, avoiding her partner's glance as she spoke.

"Holloa, Lathom!" George exclaimed. "And you not a *society man*? This begins to look suspicious. She ought to be very clever. I dare say she is. Her mother told me just now that her education cost two thousand pounds."

"Two thousand pounds!" Mr. Lathom repeated. "It would have started our mission, Vernon!"

Then he drew Titania back to the dance, and George found someone else to take Fanny out before he felt he could with propriety go on enjoying himself.

"Your letters about Florence have done some good," he told her presently. "Mother read them to the Holroyds, when they were staying here, and now we find they have settled two hundred pounds a year on her, on condition she remains in Italy; but they still declare they'll never see her again."

In the middle of the evening, just before supper was announced,

when the tent was crowded with waltzers, and Mr. and Mrs. Vernon found themselves for a moment together in the doorway able to enjoy the scene, a late arrival was heard driving up the gravel way. The sound of the band prevented any distinct sounds outside, and husband and wife went out to greet the late-comer, when they beheld a cab laden with packages, and Fabian, radiant with delight, stood on the doorsteps, a young brother on each arm and a grandmother just about to fall upon his neck.

The house was full of visitors. There was no time for explanations. Every room was occupied; but the return of the sailor could never be unseasonable. He submitted to be kissed by his mother and grandmother, to have his hands nearly wrung off by his father and friends, and then his jolly, weather-tanned face suddenly sobered. He drew his father and mother out to the hall door, where his cab yet stood while the outside boxes were being removed, and said in hurried, trembling accents:

"I—I—hope you won't mind; but I've brought home a wife."

His parents looked as if they could not trust their ears.

"What?" said his father.

"What?" said his mother.

Fabian ran out and opened the cab door, and there, sure enough, a young lady sat, who seemed very reluctant to be made known to her family.

"I can explain it all," Fabian cried, when at last he had persuaded her to dismount and enter the hall. "It's all right, father; I'm over twenty-one, you know. Can't we get anywhere out of this din?"

CHAPTER XXVII

A MOURNING BRIDE

GEORGE was busy beating up partners for the forlorn damsels who had no male friends, when Harold pulled him by the coat-tails and whispered, "There was a row on," and he'd better go in. "Fabian had come, and a girl had come with him!"

In utter perplexity George did as he was advised, and found his way into his father's study, the only room not given up to "the party." There he found the four assembled, all standing and

staring at each other, and as it seemed to him, all ready for immediate warfare.

"What, Fabian, old fellow!" George cried, wringing his brother's hand cordially. "You home? I thought——"

"I'm only on leave for a few days," Fabian said, looking greatly relieved at George's arrival. "Come and stand by me while I explain to father and mother. But first let me show you my wife." His face beamed as he turned to the slight figure at his side. "Take off your cloak, dear," he continued. And with nervous haste she loosened the large overall, and as it dropped, she stood revealed—a slight girlish figure dressed in the deepest mourning. "And your hat, too," Fabian continued. "Now, mother, you will love her, won't you? I tell you she's a regular brick!"

The girl was very pale but very pretty, and her appealing look at her mother-in-law, as her husband spoke, captivated Amy's kind heart. She looked a lady; her face was refined and amiable; and though Mrs. Vernon was completely taken back by her son's unexpected arrival, and the mystery of his marriage, she could not resist the soft dark eyes which sought hers so deprecatingly; and crossing the space between them, she took the hand timidly outstretched, and bade her welcome.

Fabian kissed his mother again and again. "I liked her first, because she reminded me of you," he said, and this delicate flattery was very sweet.

Amy looked at her husband. She had quite gone over to the side of the young couple.

"William," she said softly, "you will say you are pleased to see our daughter?"

Mr. Vernon came and bowed gravely over the trembling little hand that for a moment rested in his. His wife's appeal had touched a very tender chord. Was it possible the one defect in his home happiness was blotted out, and a daughter added to his family?

"I am glad to see you," he said, thinking as his wife had thought, as the pure childlike eyes were raised to his, that, whoever she was, she at least in herself was refined and true. To his great surprise, the girl raised her mouth and kissed him while he was bending over her. Then she burst into tears, and covering her face with her hands, rocked herself to and fro.

Fabian put his arm round her. "Have some tea, darling," he cried. "Mother, don't you think tea would do her good? She's had nothing since lunch. She got funky as we got nearer to you."

She laughed a little hysterically as the idea of tea, for an all-round remedy, was suggested; but controlled herself quickly, and turned to Mr. Vernon, who was watching her with evident sympathy, saying, with sobs between the words:

"My father has not been long dead. He was very tall, and just for the moment, you reminded me of him."

But Fabian's words made Mrs. Vernon mindful of the duty of hospitality, and George was sent off to order in refreshments while Fabian explained how he had not telegraphed, as he wanted his wife to introduce herself. "But I had no idea Aunt Gertrude was to be married to-day," he added, "or we certainly should have spent the night in town instead of coming straight on."

When George returned, he drew his father aside and proposed the young couple should go and show themselves in the tent, and so get it all over at once. "No one need know anything more than that Fabian has got married."

"That's all *we* know," was Mr. Vernon's remark.

So just when people were beginning to notice the absence of Mr. and Mrs. Vernon, they returned to the ballroom, followed by Fabian and his wife, and "My son Fabian and his bride" were introduced, as if they were an understood fact. Among the many occasions when the doings of members of the Vernon family had given excitement to Cotley, none had been more conducive to the "they say's" and "did you ever's?" than this unexpected event.

"A mourning bride," whispered Mrs. Steed, who never could quite understand why her son never made a pleasurable stir, such as each Vernon boy was constantly making in the community, adding presently, when she found herself beside old Mrs. Vernon, "And who is the sweet girl? of noble birth, I'm sure. And where did Lieutenant Vernon, R. N., meet her?"

The old lady nodded and smiled. "I'm quite deaf with the music," she said; and, still smiling, she passed away from the questioner.

"William," she said, as her son came up, "do pity my stupidity. Did you know Fabian was engaged? What does it all mean? She looks a dear creature; but artful hussies often look all right. I feel quite upset."

"Come along, and have some supper," he replied, patting her *hand* as he placed it in his arm, and drew her out of the tent. "I *know nothing* but that Master Fabian has got married—at my ex-

pense, of course," he added, with a whimsical smile; "but I'm sure she's a good girl; her eyes are as true as—yours."

Meantime Fabian was greeting everyone he knew, sometimes introducing "my wife," sometimes forgetting she was on his arm. The Marleon girls gathered round him, eagerly questioning. They had no doubts about the stranger wife. They took a fancy to her at once, and she brightened up as if she felt they were kindred spirits, and told them their names were quite familiar to her, while her pale cheeks flushed with the excitement of the scene, and her smiles showed not only dimples but also a set of exquisite teeth.

When everyone had gone and the summer morning's sunshine streamed in on "banquet halls deserted," neither parents nor young husband were inclined to remain up for "explanations,"—fatigue mastered every other feeling. Mrs. Vernon ushered her uninvited visitor into the room which had been hastily prepared, and apologized for its shortcomings; and as she turned to go, the "mourning bride" stopped her to say:

"You are very kind and good to me. I should like to kiss you."

In relating this to her husband, Amy said she wondered why she had asked permission to do what she had done to him at once.

"Superior attraction!" he replied, affecting to twirl his mustaches; but he thought of that impromptu salute with satisfaction nevertheless. "Now, don't let us suppose and wonder and infer any more," he said. "Here's to-morrow here already, and we've had no last night. Let us go to sleep, if we can."

When Amy went down to a noonday breakfast, she found her new relation inspecting Toby's and Harold's "c'lections" with so much interest that she had quite won their hearts; and whereas she had expected to find much tidying up to do, flower vases to be filled up, and traces of revelry to be put out of sight, she saw at a glance, as she entered the breakfast room, that tidy fingers had already been at work. There was a cool, orderly room, just as if it had never been disturbed from its ordinary appearance.

Mrs. Fabian rose up hastily as her mother-in-law entered. She looked slighter and paler in the morning light, and her deep mourning dress was even more impressive in its blackness. Her timidity seemed to return, and she kept hold of Arthur's hand as she advanced.

Amy had slept well, and in consequence was disposed to look at all things in a rosy light; besides, she could not look at the girl *and suppose her to be anything but creditable; the sombre dress,*

the young face and figure, the hesitation in her manner, all satisfied Fabian's mother. She wondered she had ever even for a moment doubted her. She was absolutely ashamed she had doubted Fabian. Was he likely to marry an adventuress? Was he likely to bring home a person of vulgar antecedents? In that brief moment of retrospection she felt it was high time she made amends for her unworthy thoughts, little as she had allowed them to sway her behavior, and the shrinking girl felt the warmth of her greeting, and was satisfied.

Fabian knew all was as it should be when he came in and saw his wife smiling and almost rosy by his mother's side, while Toby, with his chin on his hands, like one of Raphael's cherubs, sat opposite, looking at her with admiring eyes.

When Mr. Vernon entered, her timidity and hesitation were again apparent, as she rose at once and seemed uncertain how to greet him.

But from the first Mr. Vernon had thought of his son's marriage as imprudent and inexpedient, and had not troubled himself about the possible difference of caste ever since he had convinced himself of the bride's personal suitability. He was still certain Fabian had done foolishly in one way, but he had no intention of visiting his annoyance on the girl, so he now again greeted her kindly, and openly showed he accepted her as one of his family.

"No," he added, after he had heard she had slept off her fatigue, and was quite well and ready for breakfast, and she was about to resume her place. "No, you must come and sit by me. Your mother has her Benjamin; you and I and everyone else may go to Bath, so long as we leave him with her. Isn't it so, Amy?"

"It must be so, if you say it," she replied, with a laugh, while Toby innocently asked where was the Benjamin. Was it a man, or something good to eat?

George had breakfasted long ago, he explained, when he presently strolled in in search of luncheon. He had not been to bed at all, in fact. A swim in the river had given him the necessary refreshment, and he had called in at the Marleons' to enquire after his grandmother.

"Your grandmother!" Fabian said, *sotto voce*.

George took no notice of the interruption (old Mrs. Vernon was staying with the girls as chaperon). He found them at breakfast, not a bit tired, so he had stayed, "knowing what lazy people he had at home!"

His mother laughed.

"What a nice man your friend Mr. Lathom is!" she said. "I think Urania thought so too."

George looked sharply at her; but there was no sign of hidden meaning on her smiling face.

Mr. Lathom's entrance stopped any further remark on the subject, and as the two or three other guests soon followed, there could be nothing more than general conversation.

Neither host nor hostess was in a fitting frame of mind to discuss the dance. The dresses and the girls—all had sunk to nothing in comparison with the strangeness of having a married son unexpectedly quartered on them. The wedding of the morning, the tea to the women, the ball, each of which events had been so absorbing at the time, were all but forgotten in face of this surprising discovery. A daughter-in-law unthought of, never heard of but twelve hours ago, sitting at their table as one of the family! A daughter-in-law of whose name they were still ignorant, who yet, by her mere appearance and manner, was received unquestioned into their midst. To both the rest of the day, till their visitors left for their several homes, seemed never ending; but when father and sons found themselves together, the former almost wished the much-desired explanation could be postponed, so nervous was he.

They were in the dining room after dinner, and Fabian, full of his story, began, "Now I'll tell you all about it."

"Am I in the way?" George asked.

"What do you mean, old fellow?" Fabian replied. "Aint you one of the family?"

"All right; fire away!" was George's answer; while the father busied himself with a cigar, by way of occupying himself.

"You call her pretty, don't you?" Fabian began. "Well, at least I do, and so did all the other fellows; and it isn't so imprudent, father, after all, for she has a hundred a year of her own. But I swear I didn't know she had a sixpence till after we were married."

Mr. Vernon felt relieved to hear she was no penniless wife. It had never occurred to him that she might possess money of her own, and even a hundred a year is a grand addition to a sailor's pay, so he began to feel less nervous; and though he was by no means mercenary, he was now less disposed to question the suitability of *Fabian's* marriage. All he said was:

"Foolish fellow!"

Fabian laughed as he recognized a lighter tone in his father's voice.

"Of course," he continued, "I know I ought to have asked your consent, and all that; and so I should, under ordinary circumstances."

"You might at least have wired, to prepare us."

"Well, I thought of that, too; but she was so nervous. She was afraid you might forbid her to come—girls get such fancies, you know. But I told her you'd be delighted to see her. And so you are, aren't you?"

Fabian looked confident of his father's favorable reply; and his father was so struck by his boyish face, and the triumphant expression which was for the moment so like what Will used to assume when he knew his father had just cause to be serious, that, spite of his reason, Mr. Vernon laughed as he replied:

"Well, it was a little thoughtless, my son; but it's more your look-out than mine; but so far as I can say, on such a very slight acquaintance, your wife is certainly a charming girl."

Fabian smiled and sighed. "I thought I never should succeed in making her marry me," he said. "It was just touch and go."

"I wish you'd get on, and tell us where she hails from," George cried impatiently. "Begin at 'Once upon a time,' and so on, up to date."

"That's a good idea!" Fabian cried. "Well, once upon a time, there was a middy—that's me—ashore at Malta, with a messmate whose father was in the artillery on duty there. I've mentioned Dicky Norman in my letters, haven't I? And the Normans were very kind to me, and always asked me to go with Dicky, when I went ashore. Dicky had a little sister—my wife." His face became grave as he pronounced "my wife." Then it brightened, as if the humorous side of the question struck him most. "It sounds funny, George, doesn't it? I wonder when you will say as much?"

George flushed crimson. Fabian did not notice it, but Mr. Vernon did, with sudden alarm. Could there be another daughter-in-law preparing to surprise him?

"Well," said Fabian, "as long as our ship stayed at Malta—and you know, while I was in the Channel Fleet, we were there on and off continually—I was constantly at the Normans', and of course we got just as friendly as we are with the Marleon girls. When we left Malta, I always shared Dicky's home letters. Then

Colonel Norman died, and there was a break-up, of course; but Mrs. Norman was so cut up that she wouldn't leave her husband's grave, so Felicia——"

"Who's she?"

"That's my wife's real name; but they called her Filly, and I couldn't stand that, so I gave her the name I call her by always, 'Fay'—part of myself, d'ye see? Isn't it a good idea? Well, Fay had to stay there too, and so she grew up without seeing any relations or old friends; just getting her education at a convent as best she could."

"But I thought young Norman died? I seem to remember something tragic about him."

"So he did, only a year ago; he was killed by a shark, while he was bathing. He was on leave staying with his mother at the time, and Fay wrote to tell me about it, and to say how her mother was quite broken up. I wasn't in the Mediterranean again, you know, until six weeks ago; and when we got to Malta——"

He stopped. His voice became grave; he seemed overcome by some sad memory. George went to the window, and drew the blind up as far as it would go, while his father made some trivial remark upon the shortening evenings. Fabian emptied his wine-glass and looked up, half ashamed of his momentary weakness.

"I had never thought much about real sorrow, and all that," he said. "I used to think myself heart-broken, you know, every time I started off afresh from home. I'm sure I shall never forget that first going away, father, when you saw me off. Do you remember?"

"Ah, poor fellow, I do!"

"I often dream it all over again," Fabian went on—"when I'm out of sorts, that is; but that's all nothing compared to what I witnessed when I got to the Normans' cottage, about three miles away from the citadel. Mrs. Norman had been buried that very day——" Again he paused, and pretended to inspect his nails critically. He presently pulled himself together again, and continued, "I hadn't seen Fay for two years; she and her mother had written a few times; but the last letter, telling me of the mother's rapidly failing strength, never reached me. Of course Fay wasn't prepared to see me, when I got there, and I swear I thought she was a ghost. Her eyes were blurred out of all color; she was so weak that she could hardly stand, and there she was, without a relation near her—nobody but the native servants, and the kind

Sisters who had taught her, and who had almost persuaded her to go and live with them."

"But had they no friends among the English residents and officers' families?"

"Of course; but, as you ought to know, people in military stations are always changing, and there were actually none left now of those with whom they had been intimate in the father's time. There were a few kind creatures who had kept up with Mrs. Norman for old times' sake. But after poor Dicky's death she would see no one; and though she made Fay go now and then to spend a day in the town, you may be sure Fay had not much heart for gayety. Some ladies came out to the funeral, and tried to induce Fay to go home with them; but the poor girl was just altogether cut up, and, as I tell you, it was just on the toss whether she didn't go and throw in her lot with the nuns."

"But what were the relations about?"

"None of them knew anything about it. Mrs. Norman had gradually given up writing home, except on such occasions as acknowledging dividends, and Fay had nearly forgotten her life among them that she dreaded being obliged to go and live with people who might be quite uncongenial. However, there I was, and——"

"You cut the Gordian knot?"

"Well, it seemed the only thing to do. I couldn't leave her there to throw her lot in with the nuns, and then repent all her life—for she's not even a Roman Catholic—and she was in such a state of grief that she wouldn't accept any of the invitations of the officers' wives."

"Therefore you sacrificed yourself to give her a home," said George.

Fabian looked up sharply.

"Sacrificed myself!" he repeated angrily. "You wait till you see the girl you love in trouble. You won't talk such rubbish then!"

Again George's face flushed violently, and he quickly excused himself on the plea that he spoke unadvisedly, and Fabian calmed down.

"Well, where was I? Oh, I know. Poor thing, she clung to me because of Dicky, you see, and she said she would come to England when I was at home some time and marry me; but, at last"—and Fabian colored as deeply as George had done—"at last she

couldn't bear to let me go, so we got married quietly by the chaplain; and the day I rejoined the ship she went home by a P. & O. My captain is a brick; and when I had told him my story, he gave me leave on 'urgent private affairs,' and I came after her in a steamer. The *Flora* comes to Portsmouth to be paid off and recommissioned next week. I must join her there; and, if I am lucky, I may get an extra week or two's leave after the usual three weeks are up."

No wonder Mrs. Fabian was a "mourning bride," or that the smiles came seldom to her white face. Mrs. Vernon came into the room while the three men were still discussing. Her husband rose to put her into his chair. "You look tired out," he said. But there was more than fatigue visible—she had evidently been crying; indeed, the tears rose again as she spoke.

"Your wife has told me everything," she said to Fabian. "We must all do our best to comfort her. I think I can trust your father's son to be very patient and tender, and never to forget how sorely she has suffered."

"Why, mother," he said, while his face grew solemn, and his hands trembled as he put them on her shoulders, "is it likely I should turn into a beast?"

Then they all laughed, though Fabian's bright blue eyes were for the instant dim. It was a relief to return to the more prosaic details of ways and means.

The first thing to be done was to insert an advertisement of the marriage in the *Times*, then for both husband and wife to write to the nearest relations. The question of their home must be left for the future; meantime, Fabian agreed to spend his leave where he was.

"Felicia has settled with me," Mrs. Vernon said; "it will be best for her to stay with us until she has got quite strong again. If we find, on further acquaintance, we don't get on together, why then it will be time to think of some other plan."

Mr. Vernon chuckled. "Do you think she will be able to stand your bad temper and selfish disregard of everyone's comfort but your own?" he cried. "Why didn't you think of making such a contract with me? I'm bound to stand your neglect; but then, of course, I'm only your husband!"

"Come along, Fluffy," George said, going toward the door. "Let's have a smoke before we turn in; this violent language between husband and wife is a bad example for you."

But the mother made them remain for a while, to explain to them how she had arranged for Felicia to have her own sitting room, where she could do as she liked without being obliged to follow the family habits. It was quite evident to Fabian his imprudent early marriage was already accepted as a blessing by his mother, at all events. He had, indeed, only just begun to see his full imprudence in subjecting this young, inexperienced girl to what might have been a very different reception, and was a very trying ordeal to her.

The complete change of scene, with the knowledge of the loving home accorded her, the comfort of talking to Fabian of those dear ones who had passed away, and of the days when they were all together, had their effect on the bride. She imagined she could see some resemblance to her own grandmother—who had died many years ago—in old Mrs. Vernon, too, and that idea at once made her love her. The Marleon girls she accepted as sisters, because Fabian had made them familiar to her, and very surely, if slowly, her youth reasserted itself as health returned, till the thin white cheeks rounded out, and acquired the tint of monthly roses, and people began to say it was just as well Mrs. Fabian should live with her mother-in-law, for she was much too handsome to live by herself during her husband's absence.

When old Mrs. Vernon had settled down in her new home, she began to feel the change from the family life. To be sure, Gertrude was close by, and Gertrude's step-daughters were perpetually in and out, and her son and daughter-in-law never let a day pass without seeing her, but she was nevertheless depressed; the silent evening, the stillness of her meals, the idea that she was the last of her generation, weighed even upon her cheerful temperament. Now that all the bustle of the marriages, the journey to Italy, her son's return, and the ordering of her new household was over, she could have time to think of the immensity of the change in her circumstances. Richard's death had tried her sorely; but till all was quiet around her again, she had hardly considered how sad his ending was. While he was alive there was hope that he would repent and come back for the forgiveness she yearned to give him; but now he had passed even beyond her prayers—had died like a dog, in fact. She remembered what a pretty little boy he was when she first came home as a bride, how sweet he had been; and *it pleased* her to remember how she had loved him just the same *when her own babies shared his nursery, and how she had been*

more tender of his childish faults because she was not his real mother. There were many nights on which she almost wished she could hear his voice again in the hall, that she might have just one more opportunity of trying to win him back, and then she would go back in thought to the years of his promising school life, his disappointing youth, and his disgraceful manhood, and wonder if she could have done more than she did to turn him from the evil. Had she persevered sufficiently in trying to make him see the worse than folly of his way? Had she done right in staying his father's anger, and averting the merited punishment? All these doubts and fears, coupled with the unwonted solitude, began to prey on her health, and it was Felicia who noticed it first, and spoke of it to Amy.

"But," was her answer, "we would gladly have her live with us; but she likes to be independent. She has always been so bright and happy, one cannot think of her as a solitary old lady."

But when Amy and her husband called late in the evening—purposely late—and found her sitting idle in the firelight, evidently brooding, her son went straight to the point.

"This isn't cheerful. Mother, give up trying to live by yourself; come to us. What's the use of forcing yourself to do the impossible?"

"I am all right, dear," she said. "It's good, too, to have time for thought at my age."

But when the lamp was lighted, it showed her pale, sad face, and William went away puzzled. Felicia, straight from the experience of her mother's sick-room, saw deeper into the burthened heart, and her unspoken sympathy was very grateful. When the autumn fell, and the short days of early winter followed, Mrs. Vernon acknowledged herself vanquished.

"I have thought of a plan," she said to her son. "Send Felicia to me, if she will come, till Fabian comes back again. You and Amy are sufficient for each other's happiness. Let me ask Felicia to come to me. Don't tell Gertrude that I have felt lonely. I couldn't live with anyone—old people are best under their own roofs. Felicia can't go much into society just yet; she won't be dull; and it will be lifting something off your shoulders, if I take her."

He laughed. "We can afford a daughter," he said; "but if she consents, so will I."

The new arrangement worked well. The old lady revived and

renewed her cheerfulness, and the young lady was glad to repay some of the kindness of her new relations. The fancied resemblance to her own grandmother never lost its attraction, and amid the care and kindness of her new family she came gradually back to be the light-hearted charming creature who had first captivated Fabian's affections.

When he next got leave, he, too, went to the cottage, and then the little study again witnessed the happiness of a young couple. Mrs. Marleon went into the little room one day unannounced, and saw the old scene as it seemed to her. She turned round and went away at once, flinging back a laughing excuse for her hasty departure as she went. She was very tired when she reached home only just in time to dress for dinner. No one knew how far she had walked to wrestle with the memories conjured up by that little tableau in her early married home.

"History repeats itself."

CHAPTER XXVIII

IN THE HIMALAYAS

"DAL and I, who are having a little shooting tour together, are amazed to hear of dear old Fluffy's marriage. Fancy anyone falling in love with him! Why, our fellows guessed him at eighteen, when he was here," wrote Will, after receiving the astounding news. "We are glad to hear she's pretty. Please give our love and congratulations, and say we are going to forward wedding-presents as soon as possible. I expect furniture will be most acceptable. Dal thinks of curtains and cushion covers. I mean to send Benares trays and a gown or two. It's no good sending mere ornaments, and the brass trays will stand a lot of rough treatment, you know. It's a bad example for Dal; however, he's very bashful yet. Tell father I miss him awfully still; however, I don't have to pay the Parsees so much as I did when he was the head swell here. I don't mean to marry for a long time, now Fluffy has done it; it isn't fair to the dear old man, *who has*, no doubt, to stump up for him; besides, I shall wait till *I'm at home* next year, when I shall have more choice. See how

prudent I have grown; so father needn't fear for me falling a victim to any more flirts and gilts."

Mr. Vernon always winced over Will's ill spelling; but Amy only laughed.

"No one is perfect," she urged. "A dear, good heart is the first to be desired; and Will's heart is good and true."

She knew her husband was as eager to see Will again as she was in reality, and Will's home-coming was looked forward to by both with keenest pleasure. Next year would bring the three elder boys home together, perhaps for the last time until they were men weary with life-work. In the autumn George would start for Australian wilds. Meantime they would all have some months together; only Dalrymple would be absent; for Fabian was all but sure of obtaining coast employment, which would enable him for the next three years to visit Cotley frequently. How fair that coming year stretched before Amy! How happy she was, with her husband back again, the girls coming in and out, her boys' letters, her visits here and there with the companion she loved best in the world! Serenity reigned, indeed, all through that winter, and the wakening of nature in the young year was in harmony with her happy anticipations.

But Will did not get leave so early as he expected. A little war between some frontier tribes broke out in a part of the country he had visited some months before, and whose language he had mastered so far as understanding and speaking went, and he volunteered for service as interpreter. To speak the truth, an interpreter was not absolutely necessary; but he was a personal friend of the general in command of the small British force sent to restore order, and the young man's ardor was acceptable. So Will went out and galloped to and fro between the rival powers, delivering his messages with a dash and a geniality which pleased both, for he was never given to swaggering about "the d——d nigger," but was with the native as with his own people—full of the *bonhomie* which invariably commands respect. In the commanding officer's report to headquarters "Lieutenant Vernon's able assistance in communicating with the belligerent tribes" was particularly commended.

"The fellow's 'go' will carry him to the front," was his father's comment; but his mother was much more eloquent on her young hero's genius and tact, and pictured him in the future as *commander-in-chief* at the very least.

By the time Will, with his laurels fresh upon him, was at liberty again, Dalrymple had got leave to the hills, and begged his elder brother to join him for a few weeks before taking his long leave home. The brothers met at a dak bungalow, among the wild valleys of Kumaon, which was for two or three days to be their headquarters, and thereabouts they revelled in spring sights and sounds, dependent on their guns for savory food. It was too early in February for the rhododendrons to be completely out, but they partly flushed the hillsides with rosy color, and every species of spring flowers gemmed the undergrowth; there were scentless lilac, cowslips, colored primroses, wild roses climbing everywhere; ferns of lacelike foliage, clumps of silvery pampas grass, needle-strewn pine groves, long reaches of grassy lawns, gay with gorgeous blossoms; great upward slopes of stone glaciers, deep-reaching glades of waist-high grass, great gray boulders raising their weather-beaten heads like fossil monsters; and far down below, ever coursing forward, now babbling, now roaring as it flowed over pebbly bottom or chafed against masses of impeding rocks, the mountain stream made itself apparent and audible.

In and out of these mighty ravines and gorges the brothers wound their way in search of game, meeting no human being excepting an occasional coolie or goat-keeper—themselves little above the intelligence of the beasts they tended. Now and then they came upon flocks of sheep laden with salt; now and then the stillness of the heights would be broken by the loud jabbering of hundreds of *lungoors*, big red monkeys with white-whiskered faces, which, jumping from branch to branch, as they followed the young men's steps, seemed giving them angry notice to clear out. Then, again the cuckoo's clear note would overpower the singing of the never-tiring bullfinch, making them for the moment fancy themselves at home; or the sharp cry of the barking deer would bid them look to their rifles. Now the flight of the turquoise-colored rocket bird would distract their thoughts from the larder, or the near voice of the *chikor* would draw them from the track, till utterly baffled in pursuit, they would discover they were hopelessly lost for the time, and would shout in vain for the coolie who, carrying their luncheon in a basket on his head, was probably miles away, asleep in the shade, after filling himself with water at the nearest spring.

But whether lost and hungry up on the highest gallery-like road, so high that the stream below was but a part of Nature's great

concert of inarticulate sounds, or low down on the lawnlike border of the water, with its deafening tumult making speech well-nigh impossible, Will and Dal were happy. To be together, to do without shaving, to see no order-book, to hear no bugles, to throw aside all the tiresome routine and all the conventionality of civilization, is for a time absolute bliss. The bungalow might be inconvenient, shabby, even dirty; the khausamah might be stupid, without resources, unpunctual, uncivil; but what of that? Goat's milk was perfect; curry of pheasant was food for the gods; *chupatties* well buttered were better than dry, stale bazaar bread; wild honey is delicious; and tea grown in Himalayan air—tea of the first picking—unspoilt by keeping and packing; why, could the gods have tasted it, they would have poured out their ambrosia to the winds in disgust.

With such a feast spread before them in the wide veranda, as the long, bright day closed in, with nothing to do but eat and rest and gaze on the glories around them, how could the brothers feel anything short of satisfaction?

The bungalow stood—nay, stands—on the side of a ridge which is thickly wooded with rhododendron trees seventy and eighty feet high; before it the ground slopes till the back of another ridge parts the valley, and forms yet another great pathway of gray boulders, and level stretches leading further into the mountains, and in its turn parts and curves again among stone gorges, rising, parting, falling, winding valley within valley, height over height. Nature in its grandest and sublimest forms; nature in its sweetest, softest aspects, but ever beautiful, ever gracious, ever solemn, preaching immutability, preaching change and decay, preaching peace and safety, preaching the all-sufficiency, the all-power of the Creator.

Tired out with the day's wanderings they often sat silent, making no attempt at conversation, but letting all the preachment sink in their hearts silently, till the hills around threw dense black shadows across the moon-flecked valleys, and the voiceless procession of stars in the steel-blue sky brought unfamiliar constellations into sight, warning the weary watchers of time's flight.

On their last night a furious storm raged. The reverberations of the thunder made a sound like one continuous crash, torrents of rain dashed on the iron-roofed bungalow, and great shafts of lightning seemed to cleave the hills asunder. The brothers could

not hear each other speak. Out from the tranquillity of the mountains the spirit of discord seemed to have sprung rampant with a roar like the rattling of armed hosts bearing torches of flashing fire. Now and again the country lay before them in the lightning distinct as in sunlight—the blossoms, the verdure, the trees stricken as in a hurricane, to be followed by black darkness out of which came the cannon roar and the crashing of trees and rushing of conflicting branches as of angry waves receding over shingles. At dawn the tempest stopped as suddenly as it had begun, only the thunder continued to rumble round for hours after the clouds had rolled off to higher regions, leaving the brilliant sunshine to make diamonds glitter on every bush and fern, till by noon only the accelerated torrent down below told of the night's disturbance, the heat having absorbed all the little pools and mountain rivulets. Every here and there, as the travellers journeyed downward, they had to dismount and let their horses find their way across breaks in the pathway, or down steepes from which all surface earth had been washed away till mere stairs of boulders were left. As the road for some distance at starting led downward, they were kept silent by the rushing waters, and could see all sort of *débris* carried along, rubbish enough in English eyes, but household treasures in the eyes of the poor hillmen.

A graceful bridge crossed the water where it came tearing round jointly with a side tributary—a huge, boiling, yeasty mass of resistless force, entering from the one valley or gorge to flow on through the wider valley till, meeting a bolder and loftier barrier of misshapen rocklets, it divided perforce, and so with less volume rolled less defiantly between narrower banks.

Just as the travellers reached the foaming flood-head, wildly crashing between the rocky sides from which the bridge was hung, they saw just beyond the seething vortex a country bedstead tossing hither and thither in the turbid stream, so as to be unable to move either forward or backward, but in momentary danger of upsetting. A native woman and child, with a lean pariah dog, clung to the frail woodwork, while the dog, in an attitude of abject terror, clung to them. At any instant the little group might be released from the conflicting currents, and plunged forward into certain destruction. They were near enough to the bank for the woman's pleading expression to be distinctly visible. A poor, dishevelled hill-woman, ugly, battered, and past middle age. The child on her hip slept unconscious of all danger; and she must have

had hard work to hold him safely, clinging, as she had to cling, to the bedstead as well.

Will looked at his brother. Their eyes spoke without speech. In a moment their ponies were put into the syce's care, and they had stripped off their boots and coats, and dived headlong into the calmer pool behind the little group. There they were safe enough; but as soon as they neared the tossing craft, they felt the strength of the currents to be almost resistless. They succeeded in reaching the bedstead, however, and, one on either side holding it, they struck out manfully to pilot it to the safety of the outer pool. Both were good strong swimmers, both were accustomed to rough frolics in the water; but the sleepy river at Cotley never lashed itself into unseemly anger as did these mountain streams, and for a little time it seemed as if it was impossible to do more than keep the crazy woodwork from turning over and shout courage to the woman. The water was icy cold, too; the sun upon their uncovered heads burning hot; but their stout hearts knew no fear.

"Now!" cried Dalrymple, as a warning that he was about to make another strenuous effort.

"Now!" returned Will, striking out with all his power.

They succeeded in forcing their way a few feet toward the haven, and that success encouraged them to persevere; but as at last, by almost superhuman efforts, they crossed beyond the power of the opposing currents and gained the smooth pool, Will felt he had done his work, and had no further power to gain the bank. Swimming, as they perforce only could swim—with one arm, the other being engaged in pushing the bedstead—they were terribly handicapped, and, but for timely help, it is probable Will at least would have succumbed.

Unseen by the two men grappling with death, a party of English had come upon the scene, winding down the upper path on the opposite side of the main stream.

There were two women on Bhootan ponies—sisters—one being the wife of the tall, fair man who walked ahead, his horse following some distance behind in the charge of the syce—syces and coolies following behind again, making quite a cavalcade as they emerged, one after the other, from the great pine forest which clothed the great spur of hills which separated the two valleys whose rivers met at the junction, and descended the grass-covered slope to the bridge.

The party were only out on a day's excursion; but pleasure excursions in the hills often include danger and difficulty, possibilities which are never overlooked by the experienced. It was therefore not extraordinary on this occasion that sufficient stout rope was at hand, which, in the tea planter's strong grasp, was flung toward the strugglers; and, as Dalrymple was in much better condition than his brother, he managed to fix it to the bedstead, thus enabling it to be drawn safely to the bank, and Will, no longer hampered, was able to use both arms, and reach it also with but little difficulty. Dalrymple was ready to give him assistance in landing; but once safe on land again he swooned.

"Like a scene in a play," Dal wrote home afterward. "Poor Bill, like a ghost, and dripping from head to foot, awoke to find two pretty girls bending over him, smacking his hands and spooning brandy down his throat, while Mr. Stanley and I rubbed his legs and feet vigorously. The warm sun helped him as much as anything, and he was soon able to sit on 'Asrufi.' But the Stanleys wouldn't hear of his going on down to Raneebagh that day, so he went on to their bungalow, somewhere in those parts, and I came on alone, for my leave was up. Poor Bill! I could tell even in the short time I saw them together, he is a gone coon on pretty Miss Stanley, or whatever may be her name. It's just like him. He read me such a lecture on the folly of marrying young, or, indeed, of caring for a girl at all until one has at least got one's company. Mother will be glad to hear we emptied our pockets for the poor dirty old nigger woman whose all had been swept away in the storm, and the Stanleys have promised to look after her."

Given a solitary bungalow built on the latest principles of beauty and comfort combined, in the midst of the grandest and fairest scenery in the world, the companionship, all through the long, lazy day, of a pretty girl, whose thoughts are mysterious to you, whose history is unknown, but whose delight is to do you service; given a sense of languor and weakness, gained through suffering and glory, and admit how impossible it would be for even a colder disposition than William Vernon's to maintain his wits unscathed.

Indeed, he did not try; he gave himself up to the fascinations *without a struggle*. Military ardor and glory ceased to charm in *comparison* with this sylvan deity, Penelope Grace. He breathed

in happiness with the flower-scented air, and could imagine no life more blessed than one spent at her side. He was not one to keep his feelings to himself. He told her he had never felt anything like this before; that he had admired other girls, but never really loved them, nor did his conscience prick as he made this declaration. He had really forgotten the love scenes with Annie Lightup, and the quickly sundered engagement at Wattibuldi; in fact, his past experiences were altogether lost sight of in the effulgence of his new.

Mr. Stanley was out among his plantations all day. Mrs. Stanley had her household, her animals, and her nursery to superintend. Penelope had the flowers to look after, and was always busy making little garments. Will was allowed to go in and out as he liked—now into the nursery veranda chaffing the ayahs in their own tongue, and playing with the children; now watching Mrs. Stanley give out the day's stores from her godown; now breaking off high blossoms for Penelope, and cutting off thorns from rose stalks, lest her pretty fingers should suffer, and often sitting soberly in the deep veranda reading to the ladies while they sewed.

On the fourth evening of his stay, he told his host he thought seriously of giving up the army and going in for tea planting. Mr. Stanley laughed; he had read the reason for this sudden taste for planting in the lad's eyes.

"You are aware a lump sum down will be necessary before you can start?" he answered.

"Well," Will said, nothing daunted, "I dare say that difficulty could be got over. What sized sum?"

Mr. Stanley turned a fresh cigar over between his fingers, and, still smiling, replied:

"I'll tell you what I've had to lay out. Twenty years ago, I was worth altogether ten thousand pounds. I had no chance of anything further coming to me except through my own efforts. I wanted to marry; some day you'll understand what power lies in that desire"—he avoided looking at his guest, lest his sparkling eyes should betray him; "but my girl's friends didn't see it. They told me an idle man with ten thousand pounds and no expectations was not their sort. So I came out here—straight from a club life, mind you—and I bought this property. I invested next in a 'John'—a Chinaman experienced in tea growing, you know; and I began in fine style, living under a tent, and riding expensive horses about the estate, while John and an English overseer worked

a host of coolies. First of all, the season's crop failed; next, my treasure of an overseer ran off with everything he could realize; then 'John' murdered a coolie, and naturally made tracks also. It was excellent training for me, and made me bestir myself; but, in six years' time, I was still houseless, still growing only scanty crops, of second-rate market value, and I had sunk all save a few hundreds of my ten thousand pounds. A neighbor, such a good fellow,—I dare say he'll be over here before you leave us,—took charge of affairs here while I went home to negotiate for a loan. My girl had married meantime, married a rich swell, and I was very sore for a long time. But her marriage gave me a very needful fillip, it made me resolve to overcome all my difficulties, and let her see she hadn't spoilt my life, after all.

"When I reached England, an old college friend, Leonard Grace, sent for me. He was dying then; but he and I had been great friends, and our correspondence had gone on briskly ever since, so, though every hour was precious to me, and he was up in the north of Scotland, I didn't hesitate to obey his summons. He told me he had no near relations he should like his two girls to live with after his death. His wife had been dead two or three years, and he asked me to promise to act as their trustee, letting them remain at the school where they then were, which was kept by his wife's old governess, till I married and could make them a home. At that time I thought I never should marry; and I told him even if I ever did, a tea plantation in the Himalayas would be a gruesome home for girls. But he seemed to pin his faith on me, and was so urgent, and so unfit to be put out, that I consented. He only lived a fortnight afterward, and, would you believe it, the dear old fellow had left me five thousand pounds in consideration of my accepting the trust of his two girls.

"I went to see them, and found they were quite prepared to accept me in their father's place. They were then about eight and twelve years old. I ought to tell you I was some years younger than old Grace. This five thousand pounds, which I used as a loan to be repaid to the girls, was a regular fairy gift—it pulled me together marvellously. I never once looked back, as they say; but it was hard work and close work for me, I can assure you; and I did not see my way to a holiday till I had built a house, and got a good balance at my banker's."

"And then?" Will asked, smiling.

"Ah!" he replied, "then." After a moment's pause he added

—"Penny did not come out till she was old enough to choose. But of course the sisters are happiest together, and now I can always promise to take them for a fling every year to the plains. We have nice neighbors, too, and the children keep us lively; only, don't you see, there must be money forthcoming to start planting with."

"Fifteen thousand pounds sounds a lot!" Will said contemplatively.

"And there are dark days even in this paradise," his host added. "Come and hear the girls' opinion."

"About the rains?" Penelope exclaimed, when her brother-in-law bade her enlighten Mr. Vernon about the rainy season, as they joined forces in the moonlit veranda. "About the rains, when we all grow mouldy, and caterpillars roost on everything, inside and outside, and leeches get into the soup, and mushrooms grow in the drawing room, and *tic polongas* hide under our pillows, and bullfrogs give concerts in our bathrooms, and our servants take to beating their wives as a little amusement, and *Shaitan* comes every night and dances on the godown roofs? Oh, the rainy season is an awful, awful time! All the tea coolies ran away once because a man-eating tiger came among their huts for shelter. Next time Eva and I mean to strike, too, and go off to Naini Tal, in time for the club dances."

"Do you mean next time the man-eating tiger comes, or next rainy season?" Mr. Stanley asked. "If the latter, you'd better begin packing, for we shall soon have the rains."

"We are let off very easily at Wattibuldi," said Will. "Shall I see about a house for you there?"

It seemed to Will, as he went to bed that night, that the rains might stand his friend in making Penelope Grace think life in the plains more desirable, notwithstanding the heat. Yet his host's story had disquieted him. He argued that the girl's father must have been very rich to be able to give five thousand pounds to his trustee; and if Penelope was an heiress, how dare he ask her to marry him? for, though only four days had passed since they met, marriage was already in the young man's thoughts. To be sure, he had let her know he loved her already, and she had only laughed at him; but that was better than frowning, and she could not suppose he knew she had money then. The difficulty now was, how was he to come to an understanding before he left? If she *did not consider a proposal premature*, her brother-in-law and sister

certainly would. Yet, to go away without ascertaining his chance of success was beyond his power, and he could not prolong his stay beyond the week. A very disagreeable surprise awaited him in the morning. When he entered the veranda, where breakfast was laid all through the fine weather, he found a visitor.

Penelope Grace, with a chubby baby niece in her arms, was standing beside a good-looking man who had evidently just arrived, for his pony was being led away. Penelope was bidding him welcome with pink, dimpled cheeks and laughing words; while the baby, frightened by the stranger, was clinging round her neck, the pretty baby face pressed close against the girl's shoulder. Will saw in an instant the newcomer's eyes were admiringly fixed on the group, and he felt instinctively the presence of a rival. Penelope turned, read his thoughts, and colored still deeper. She quickly introduced the two men, and Will recollected having heard the newcomer's name repeatedly, "Our nearest neighbor, Jim Leigh." So this was the man who shot, and hunted, and rode to perfection—a very Nimrod; indeed, a very "Admirable Crichton." And he had pictured a coarse, jungly bachelor, never supposing him to be what he was—a well grown, well clad, handsome man, though many years older than himself.

Will was so dull and distraught at breakfast that his entertainers were alarmed; and, notwithstanding all his assurances of being perfectly well, he was not allowed to ride or walk out that day, while Mr. Leigh did his best to cheer and amuse him so kindly that before night Will had, for very shame, pulled himself together and regained his better nature.

The visitor was off again at dawn next day. Will heard the planter ride off with him, and he took comfort from the fact that Penelope had not risen to see them go. She was sitting idly out in the shade of some pine trees, with a sleeping child on her lap, when Will came out in that hour before breakfast, which was spent by Mrs. Stanley in seeing the daily stores given out, and he knew he could count on an uninterrupted chat. Penelope put up her finger as he approached, and in a very low voice bade him not awake the baby.

"It's getting another tooth," she said, "and has hardly slept all night."

Will grinned. The situation was to his mind; it obliged *him* to draw his chair very near hers, and to lower his voice *also*.

"I heard your visitor go off," he began. "What a nice fellow he is!"

He said this as a sop to his conscience.

"Very."

He looked at her quickly, but she was gazing calmly on the rounded face of the child.

"How long does it take him to ride home?"

"If he could go as the crow flies, the distance is ten miles; but by the road he is obliged to follow it is thirty. He'll find a fresh pony halfway, and be at home in four hours."

"And are you his nearest neighbors?"

"Yes."

"I should think he's often here, then?"

"Pretty often."

There was a long pause; then he said, "He must have a dreary time of it."

"With us for his nearest neighbors? Thanks."

She shook with suppressed laughter. But he hardly observed her amusement; he was nerving himself to speak more decidedly.

"May I ask you a plain question, Miss Grace?"

"You may, Mr. Vernon."

She turned her laughing face to him; but seeing him very grave, she made haste to compose herself.

"And you will give me a plain answer, and take no offence whatever?"

Will fidgeted, but it was not his nature to hesitate long. He sighed, put both his hands in his pockets; and then, forgetting the baby, added in his natural tone:

"Are you engaged to him?"

The child stirred, half opened its eyes, and pursed out its lips ready to cry. Penelope gathered it up in her arms, and rocked herself to and fro with her hot cheeks pressed against it. Will thought she never would be satisfied; but the little creature was soon sound asleep again.

"Oh, bother that dear baby," he whispered. "You promised a plain answer, you know."

She shook her head at him, but gradually convinced herself all was right, and laid the child again across her lap.

"A plain answer," he persisted.

"Don't you think it's a very cheeky question?" she cried.

"I don't mean to be cheeky; it's an anxious one to me."

"Well, then, it's a very silly question."

"Ah, now, you said you would give me a plain answer."

He put his hand on her arm appealingly. She did not shake it off, but bending low over the child, affected to observe it anxiously.

"Penelope," he said, emboldened.

"Miss Grace," she murmured, blushing even over her ears and throat.

"Miss Grace, will you have the kindness to answer according to your promise? Yes or no?"

"You remind one of the catechism, 'N. or M.'"

"Or of the marriage service."

"Why are you so silly to-day?"

"Why are you so tricky?"

"I'm not tricky. How dare you say so?"

"It is true, nevertheless; you promised to answer, and you are shirking your word, and making fun of me."

"I wonder ayah doesn't come for baby."

"Bother ayah! Please say 'Yes' or 'No.'"

"Yes or no, then."

He tightened his grasp on her arm as he said:

"This is unworthy subterfuge; but I suppose you are."

"Are—what?"

"Why, engaged to that planter fellow."

She looked all round as if hoping for some interruption; but the only people in sight were servants arranging the veranda table—only the far-reaching view over hills and dales, uninterrupted by human habitations. She was as entirely alone with him as if they were Adam and Eve in Paradise. So her gaze came back to him at last, and it thrilled him through and through. He pressed the question no further, only let his hand creep down over hers and hold it tight, as he said:

"And you will let me call you Penelope—*my* Penelope?"

"If you like." Her words were scarcely audible, but he heard them aright.

"My own dearest sweet—" A shadow fell beside them; the white-sheeted ayah had reached them noiselessly. She took in the situation in an instant, but gave no sign; only salaamed profoundly, and then carried the still sleeping baby away.

Breakfast had been long waiting when the young couple at last emerged from the pine plantation, and strolled over the lawn toward the veranda as if time, for them at least, had ceased to be.

Before evening Will and Penelope had settled everything. He was to write home and have his parents' consent; he was not to take leave for England, but to spend three months with the Stanleys. If all went well, they would be married next year, when Penelope would be of age. They completely talked over Mrs. Stanley to their view, and when the fact of the engagement was made known to Mr. Stanley, and he demurred and objected, he found his own wife against him, and his prudent opinion utterly rejected by the majority. He urged the shortness of the acquaintance, the folly of matrimony for a lieutenant—he was bidden to reflect that Mr. Vernon was no chance acquaintance of uncertain parentage; but the gallant son of a well-known Indian civilian, and that Penelope's property was sufficient for comfort even without the lieutenant's pay, and that it mattered not which side had money so long as there was money.

Perhaps Will's own humility went further toward gaining Mr. Stanley's consent than the wife's enthusiasm. Will pleaded his cause so deferentially, and made so little of himself, that his host was touched, and gave way so far as to agree to an engagement if Mr. Vernon fully consented also, and if Penelope's fortune was tied up strictly for her separate benefit.

Will would have repudiated Penelope's fortune altogether in his eagerness. He said he was sure his father would increase his allowance, and with the adjutancy which he was promised, he could keep a wife quite comfortably, without touching a halfpenny of hers.

"All very well now," Mr. Stanley said; "but money never comes amiss when the honeymoon is over."

One more day of ecstatic bliss was passed, and then with renewed vows the lovers had to separate. Will's fully restored health could not excuse further delay in joining his regiment again; and he looked forward to the three months' privilege leave.

On that last day he wrote a long and particular account of what had befallen him to his mother and father—full of hope and pride and happiness. The letter started on its homeward journey the evening before he started for Wattibuldi.

As he stood in the dawn of that last morning, he seemed to have spent months instead of days in that lovely, lonely spot—the view was engraven on his heart, he told Penelope. The distant snow-peaks bathed in quickening, glowing color—citadels in mid-heaven, *the earth mists rolling off the still shadowed plains, the flower-*

ing trees acquiring brilliancy with the strengthening light, the sweetness and freshness of the morning breeze, the indescribable purity of the untainted air, were all part and parcel of the love he felt for her; he bade her think of him there on that spot where they then stood, every morning when she first stepped out, and breathe a prayer for him. He was terribly sentimental, terribly lovesick; he could not swallow any breakfast; he kissed the baby twice, in his overpowering affection for everything belonging to this Agapemone; he turned again and again as he at length rode at a foot's pace down the mountain path; and when he could see no trace of the group waving farewells, and the forest trees had shut in the dear house, and no sign of any habitation was visible, he felt so unnerved and desolate that actual tears fell on his pony's mane.

Part of the way was the same by which he had been slowly brought after saving the drowning woman and child; and, after an hour's riding, he came in sight of the bridge, beneath which the mountain stream now flowed smoothly. He stopped for a moment before descending the steep approach to the bridge, and waved to the syce, and the coolie who carried his portmanteau, to hurry on after him, and then turned to pursue his way.

CHAPTER XXIX

A ROLLING STONE

WHEN her hero had passed entirely from view, Penelope went off alone into the pine wood which bordered the lawn, and recalled all the events of his visit; how crowded the week had been, bearing her away from her irresponsible girlhood. Only a week since she had first seen him, in peril of his life, and had bent over him, wondering whether it was possible for the color to return to his ashen face. She recalled his first evening with them—his fascinating weakness, his gratitude for the little services he was obliged to accept at their hands, his boyish light-heartedness as soon as he recovered, his manly thoughtfulness in a thousand little acts for others; she thought of many shortcomings on her own part, and, *as she paced in and out of the tranquil wood, she asked herself if she loved him as well as he loved her.*

"Only a week," she answered; "and I did not begin to think of him as a lover till he had already made up his mind about me. Of course I shall love him more and more as I realize it. Who could help loving him—such a handsome, charming fellow?" So she nursed her feelings till she had persuaded herself into believing her heart was wholly his, and then she sighed, and next she yawned, and went off to find her sister.

"That's right," Mrs. Stanley cried, as Penelope joined her in the veranda; "come and let us have a good talk; there won't be too much time, after all, though Geoff says you are to wait a year. We shall have to send home for price lists, and it takes so long getting one's self thoroughly understood. Our own dirzees might do all the linen—it is so much nicer made under one's eyes—if we give them lots of time; but we must get the stuff out from home."

Penny flung herself into a rocking-chair. "'There's many a slip between the cup and the lip,'" she said, with a careless laugh. "Oh, we really needn't begin to think of a trousseau yet. And, Eva, isn't he a dear fellow?"

"Indeed, I think so, and so does Geoff; though he's obliged to be cautious, as your guardian, you know."

"You are quite sure you are satisfied, Eva?"

"Why, Penny, you talk as if *you* had a doubt?"

"Oh, no, not the shadow of a doubt. I think he's just the very, very——" She broke off, blushing, and covered her face with her hands. She was silent for a time, then added suddenly; "I wonder if Jim Leigh will get to know?"

"Of course he will. Poor Jim! I believe he likes you, dear; but he's too old for you. Mr. Vernon will suit you in every way."

"Too old! Why, he's not so much older than I am—than Geoff is older than you!"

"That's different—Geoff is Geoff. But Jim Leigh can't reproach you, dear, can he?"

Eva looked earnestly at her sister; Penny sprang to her feet.

"I never let him think I liked him, if that's what you mean," she replied; "but I should be sorry if he took it for granted. He's a dear, good fellow, but not like——"

She nodded to her sister to fill up the blank, and ran round to the nursery veranda, to reappear presently with the baby in her arms and two elder infants clinging to her skirts, and a romp followed that proved the parting with her lover had not entirely

broken her spirits, though every time she kissed the baby her lips went to the same cheek which Will had pressed so lately.

In the heat of noon, when the children had been fetched away to bed, she retreated into the cool inner room, and commenced her first love-letter, which she had promised should follow him quickly. She lingered over the commencement, for though she had called him Will several times to his face, it had been done under compulsion, and she hardly liked to write it. There was not much to say, considering he had only left three hours before ; but some women can spin nothing into something, and make it interesting, and lovers are not lovers if they are critical, so she filled four pages dexterously, and then debated about the grand finale. They had discussed the matter together—there were to be so many crosses at the beginning, so many at the end, and every cross was to be put on the place the lips had made sacred. “Yours till death” had been insisted upon by Will as the only conclusion he would accept. She had said it was too strong ; but he had solemnly asked her if their union was not to be for life, and she had finally agreed ; so now she wrote the words, and added the crosses, blushing as she wrote. And just as she had placed it in the cover, and directed it in her very neatest writing, lest his brother officers should see it, she was attracted into the veranda by the sounds of an arrival. Sounds other than ordinary ones were so seldom heard that they were proportionately exciting, and some idea of a bachelor’s visit quickened her pulses, and drew her outside. But as she stepped beyond the chick hanging over the open glass door, her sister, who was already outside, called to her peremptorily to go in again. Penelope caught sight of a little group of servants staring, like their mistress, toward the entrance drive, which was hidden from where she stood, and she naturally advanced instead of receded.

“Go in !” Mrs. Stanley shouted, waving her back in a very frenzy ; “don’t you hear, Penny ? Go in—go in at once—go in, I say !” As she spoke, she stamped her foot and turned herself now toward the girl, now toward the knot of servants huddled together at the corner of the nursery veranda.

Penelope turned to obey ; she had never before been spoken to in so harsh a manner—but as she turned, a syce, leading a pony, came into view, and she recognized both as Will’s. With a joyful exclamation she darted to her sister’s side, forgetting the *strangeness* of her manner.

“*Has* he come back ?” she cried—“has he ?”

The words were arrested on her lips, for closely following the pony a little procession came slowly toiling upward—a roughly improvised bier borne by four hillmen—four more accompanying them to take turn about, and on the bier a body covered from head to foot by a brown country blanket. Mr. Stanley sprang from somewhere at the same time, and gave orders to the coolies. Mrs. Stanley clutched her sister's arm.

"He is dead?" Penelope asked calmly.

"He is dead," Eva replied, with a burst of tears. It was she who needed support, and Penelope led her in, and bade her sit down and be quiet, herself still unable to realize the scene. They sat together, silently listening to the heavy thud of the coolies' bare feet carrying their burden through the veranda to the drawing room. After a time, they were heard to return with light footsteps, and then began that irritating, droning sound of talking at a little distance which is a sound of frenzy to some undisciplined natures, and which on this occasion, significant as it was, seemed to goad Mrs. Stanley beyond endurance.

"Why doesn't Geoff come to us?" she whispered. She was so full of the horror she felt herself, that she overlooked for the time the fact of her companion's greater claim to consideration. "I can't think how it happened. Geoff ought to come and tell us," she continued. "I hope the poor children didn't see it. I can't believe he is dead. I can't believe it."

Penelope's eyes had fallen on the letter she had just written. "Yours till death," she had said in it, and the words returned to her instead of the words her sister uttered. She had hesitated about putting them, though it was only for once, after all—"Yours till death." *He* certainly had been faithful, she argued in a dull, listless way, as if she were criticising a book, or a case in which she had no part. What was to be done with the letter? Was he never to know she had written what he bade her to write? Would he never smile over the crosses she had placed as he directed?

She started when her brother-in-law at last joined them, his gaze going direct to her, as if he pitied her exceedingly. His wife clutched his hand and drew him to her side.

"Oh, why didn't you come sooner?" she said. "What has happened? Can he be really dead?"

He put his arm round her and soothed her, wondering ~~she was~~ *the one to show such weakness.*

"I had to send off a runner to telegraph to his brother," he said. "We can do little till he comes, poor young fellow! It will be an awful shock. He was killed close to the bridge. A stone rolled down over the mountain side and killed him before he could have seen it coming. There is no pain on his face." His kind voice broke; Eva sobbed; but Penelope listened as if to a story. "I should like you to see him soon," he continued. "It will comfort you to see how peaceful he looks. I am going to photograph him at once, while he appears only sleeping, and I want you to get some flowers; his father and mother will like to have it."

Mrs. Stanley rose. "You will go with us, Geoff."

She put out her hand to her sister, and Penelope went out with them; but as soon as they stood in the drawing room, and she saw the still figure stretched in the dim light, she drew back as if suddenly conscious of what it all meant to herself. Her face filled with terror; she backed out of the room.

"I can't see him," she said, her voice, out of all control, striking harshly on the stillness. "I would rather not. Oh, let me go away." She shook all over; but fear was more apparent than grief. "I never saw anyone dead," she added. "I would rather remember him alive."

They were puzzled by her dry eyes, but supposed she would break down all the more passionately when she fully realized her lover's death.

They all sat up through the night, not knowing how soon Dalrymple would arrive, and Penelope would not be left alone. She asked for all the particulars as the syce had given them, and made her brother-in-law explain exactly how the heavy stone, gaining force in its bounding descent, had struck the left temple with unerring aim. She even discussed the reason he had not noticed its approach. The stream would be making a great noise, she supposed, and naturally he would be looking intently at the scene of his struggling in the water, and recalling all that happened then; and though she talked with bated breath, and her face was grave and sad, she was perfectly free from the agonized regret which might have been expected.

In the early morning Dalrymple arrived. As he entered the room, covered with dust, staggering with the fatigue of the long rapid journey by train and dak and horseback, he looked eagerly round, as if hoping to find his fears unrealized, and something in *his expression—that subtle family resemblance, which comes and*

goes so strangely—startled the girl at last, and made her break into bitter weeping.

Dalrymple shuddered. His boyish heart was sorely tried. Penelope's tears totally unnerved him. He threw himself on his knees beside her, and burying his face in her gown, he cried like a schoolboy.

She stopped in sudden amaze. It had never before been given her to see a man's tears, and in this agonized sorrow she recognized a depth unsounded in her own heart.

By and by, when his grief had had its way, and he had looked on the happy smile of the dead, as Will lay, with flowers all round him, his head so placed that the death wound was out of sight, he was able to take his proper part in the arrangements for the burial, which was to take place that morning. Penelope chose the spot in a little bowery dell just beneath the pine wood bordering the lawn. She took masses of roses, and showed the coolies how to line the grave; but she kept to her resolution of not seeing Will again. Just before the coffin was closed, she brought her letter, tied round with a long bright strand of her hair, and asked that it might be laid upon his breast under the myrtle cross she had made.

"I can't make her out," Eva told her husband. "I expect she will break down altogether when it is all over."

Indeed, so much did they fear her composure was but a mask, which must soon give way violently, that they tried to dissuade her from going to the funeral; but she insisted on going, and she and Dalrymple, hand-in-hand, represented as chief mourners that loving family at home, who were even at that moment, in happy unconsciousness, planning and preparing for the dead man's return. Dalrymple was distracted at the idea of the telegrams which must be sent. How could he word them to give the most information concisely, and yet not brutally? He wished telegrams were still unknown; and yet but for the telegraph Will must have been laid to rest by strangers only.

At Wattibuldi the sharp announcement came in the midst of an entertainment given by the dragoons to the station. Will would have been there but for the consequences of the storm. His readiness in the little skirmish on the frontier was the subject of admiring discussion among many of the guests who deplored his absence. His brother officers were generous in their praise of him. *Such a good fellow! Such a jolly chum! They were*

accustomed to laugh at his little failings among themselves sometimes ; but one often loves one's friends the more because they are not too perfect, and the regiment was proud of his gallantry, and would allow no disparagement behind his back. So when the colonel opened the telegram, standing in the mess garden, surrounded by his guests, and, in his utter unpreparedness, was unable to disguise the shock the contents gave him, the news spread rapidly through the gay crowd.

The English in India have been traduced, both by tongue and pen, as frivolous, selfish, and profligate, as if something in the climate corroded the heart and corrupted the morals. The spreaders of these general calumnies are probably unfortunate in having lived only among those black sheep who surely are to be found in every country and society, or else are unable to recognize virtue. Nowhere are such acts of unselfish kindness, such unsparing help, and such tender solicitude for their fellow-exiles shown because nowhere else are there such constant opportunities for the practice of all deeds of charity. Home life in India wears its purest, fairest aspect, as a rule, and the joys and sorrows of the individual are usually the joys and sorrows of the station. A friend made in India, amid the rapid changes of society, when the old home seems as far off as Paradise, is a friend made forever ; and when he crosses one's path, maybe after long years, we spring to greet him with a pleasure rarely accorded to friendships formed elsewhere.

Now when the bare fact of the gay young soldier's death was realized, smiles fled and voices were hushed, the band was stopped, the company dispersed. The dragoons stood about around the stables, talking with fewer oaths than usual, and in the stable where Will's charger stood, having been sent on direct after the campaign was over, was an ever-changing throng, seeming to realize better the fact of its owner's death as they looked at his charger and commented upon its points.

In the mess-room the officers discussed the meagre information. Will had written long letters, both from the dak bungalow and from the plantation. He had made much of his game-bags and very little of his gallant rescue of the drowning woman, letting Dalrymple appear the hero. He had described the Stanleys' hospitality and written with much animation of the sweetness of the *ladies* and the beauty of their surroundings ; and many had been *the bets* that he would once more fall a victim to feminine charms.

But there were no bets canvassed now, not even an allusion to this, the weak point in his armor. He was extolled by all his brother officers as *sans reproche*, and many a careless youth hoped his book would show as fair a page when he was summoned to the last great orderly room.

CHAPTER XXX

TRIAL

At home in England the rain had fallen persistently all day. It was cold and gloomy, but George had run over to Cotley for the day, and his mother had asked the Marleon girls and two or three other of his old friends to come in for a carpet dance after dinner; so by them the outward darkness was uncared for. Dinner was "put on," that the gathering might take place at eight o'clock, and directly he had dined Mr. Vernon went off to his mother's to fetch Felicia and to read some Indian letters and papers concerning Will's conduct in the frontier affair. There was but a meagre mention in the *Overland Mail*, only:

"The force benefited greatly by the services of Lieutenant Vernon, 50th Dragoons. This rising young officer speaks the peculiar dialect of that part of India fluently, and was able to interpret between the conflicting powers to the entire satisfaction of General Marshall."

But the private letter entered into details, and extolled the young man's diplomatic skill and good-tempered zeal very highly.

His grandmother was delighted. "And to think," she exclaimed, "such a lad nearly lost his chance, owing to these brain-splitting examinations!"

"My dear mother," her son cried, laughing, "you and Amy prize the lad too highly; it's pure cheek that pulls him through. But I do hope you won't spoil him between you, when he comes home."

"He's a son to be proud of," she rejoined.

"Well, well, I admit he's a son to be fond of, as sons go," he added quickly.

"*Heart's better than brain, dear.*"

"Baith's best," he cried ; "but I always think of him when I read how Absalom stole all hearts. Not that Will would steal them for a bad purpose—there's not a particle of vice in him ; but he does manage to win everyone over to his side. I shall be as glad as you to see Master Bill again. Now, here's a visitor ! I'm off ; are you ready, Fay ?"

The knock at the front door was followed by the entrance of Mr. Marleon. He held a telegram in his hand, but put it in his pocket as soon as he saw Mr. Vernon.

"This is an honor !" Mrs. Vernon cried, with a cordial smile. "Two gentlemen visitors together ! A message, I suppose, from Gertrude ?"

Mr. Marleon was very grave. It struck Mr. Vernon he was not wanted, for he had seen how instantly the telegram was put out of his sight ; so he bade "Good-night," and went away with Felicia. But they had not gone very far when his mother's maid overtook him.

"Will you please to come back ?" she said, panting with the run.

As they turned to obey a sudden dread of disaster came to him, and fear for Isoline or Fabian oppressed him ; but for his boys in India he felt no alarm.

His mother came to him as he returned to the room and took his hand. She was trembling, and her eyes were tearful.

"My dear, dear boy," she said, "Dalrymple has telegraphed."

He staggered as if she had struck him, and she felt his hand close on hers as if for support.

"Dalrymple !" he echoed. He put his other hand out toward Mr. Marleon. "But why to you ?" he asked.

"Vernon, old fellow," Mr. Marleon said, with infinite pity, "the poor boy could not bear to wound you so sorely ; he telegraphed to me to break it."

"Something has gone wrong, then, with Will ?"

"Yes."

"He's not dead ?"

For a moment there was silence ; then old Mrs. Vernon began to sob. She bent her face down on her son's hand and kissed it.

"If only I could bear this for you !" she cried.

He sat down as if his strength had left him, and mutely held out his hand again toward his friend. When he had the telegram, *he tried to read it, but could not. He looked at his mother, and she repeated the words :*

"Will was accidentally killed to-day, by rolling stone, in Kumaon. Break this at home."

No need to explain how it happened to one who knew how often such fatalities occur.

"It would be immediate," he said, after a long pause ; then, "How am I to tell her ?" He rose as he spoke, nerving himself as he thought of the task before him. "Mother, you'll come, too ? We'll have a cab ; you won't get cold."

He was thoughtful for her even then, and she said she could not bear to be left behind. So they all drove together, and Mr. Vernon went in first, pausing before he entered the drawing room.

The hall was full of furniture taken out to make room for dancing ; the visitors had arrived, and Amy was playing a waltz while the others danced. As he stood, trying to consider how he should proceed, he half opened the door, and a rush of happy voices mingled with the music came to him as he stood in his misery. He could not face it ; he turned away to his own room, and managed to tell a servant to ask her mistress to come to him there.

Amy came flying in. She was dressed in pretty evening costume, her face was flushed with happiness. "Be quick," she said ; "we are practising the new waltz ; then the girls will be able to teach it to Will." Her smiles fled as she looked at her husband. He stepped forward, drew her in, and closed the door.

A letter from Will arrived the next day, and, to everyone's surprise, it comforted his parents ; it was full of life and fun—full of plans for his visit to England ; it repeated his usual little criticisms—none the less comic for their earnestness—on blunders in high places ; and sententious advice for his brothers. It was Will at his happiest and gayest, and the misspelt words were plentiful, as usual. Amy smiled as she read it—smiled and then wept till the bitterness of her sorrow was literally washed away. For the coming week she seemed to live only in the thought of yet another letter warm with affection, and when it came—a joint production of Will's and Dalrymple's—illustrated copiously with more or less exactitude, each brother detailing anecdotes of the other's skill in "bagging," both evidently enjoying their *tête-à-tête* holiday, she almost persuaded herself there had been some mistake. *The last letter, written from the Stanleys', came at the same time*

as Dalrymple's account of the fatal return to the bridge which had already been the scene of danger to both brothers. Mr. and Mrs. Vernon read the younger brother's letter first. Dal wrote with passionate sorrow, filling their hearts with solicitude for this younger darling left to bear this first great trouble alone among strangers, though they knew there would be no lack of sympathy shown him. Dal told the story with careful circumstance, knowing how each word would be weighed; he seemed to feel their longing for detail, and omitted nothing that he could say to convince them poor dead Will was honored in his death, and wept over in his burial. He spoke of Penelope walking with him to the grave, and of her kindness to him, and so prepared them for Will's letter telling them of his new engagement.

Amy's heart bled afresh as she pictured the girl so terribly bereft of her lover; the pretty message Penelope had sent through Will convinced her she was charming. She could hardly bear to think of the widowed heart in the solitude of the hills; she pictured her ever adorning the grave with flowers, and weeping increasing tears.

Perhaps it was best she could picture a grief as great as her own. She wrote a long, affectionate letter to the girl, urging the exercise of faith and resignation. It eased her own sadness and soothed her own regret; but when Penelope received it at Dehra Doon, whither her sister had taken her for change, it amazed her to have such deep feeling attributed to her; indeed, she had the greatest difficulty in answering in a suitable strain.

"I don't think I feel things like most people," she told Eva, and then she fell a-wondering why Jim Leigh had gone off to England, just when she felt so dull.

In the first few days of their sorrow, George had been comforted by Urania. George had been rather left out in the cold; it had not been remembered how he and Will, as nearest in age, had been together all their childhood and early youth. George had been Will's adviser (though his advice was rarely acted upon) in the days of Annie Lightup's supremacy. George's talents and industry had often shed reflected glory on Will's minor ability, and the idler had often escaped censure because of the student's special talents. George had been stanch to Will in many a school row, and Will had ever extolled, and never envied, his younger brother. When it was known Will would never again make one of the brotherhood, George had sickened with the shock, and yet he was

expected to be able to do all the necessary writing in the family, to bear best of all the others to discuss the accident with the many friends who came to question and to sympathize. No one guessed how his heart ached and longed for the loving, inconsequent, dashing, idle companion whose sunny temper never questioned motives, never fancied slights—whose very incapacity for intellectual pleasures was lovingly amusing, and in whose familiar presence there was never failing fun. George did his part bravely, repressing his weariness, bearing his pain to himself to lift some of the sadness from his father's and mother's faces ; but not altogether unobserved. Urania read something of his burthen in his pained eyes and drawn face, and her merely friendly manner was altered toward him. So his loss was also his gain.

It was impossible for him, who had watched her varying expression so long and so closely, not to notice the alteration. Instead of avoiding him she sought him, and when they were together she encouraged him to discuss his future plans, so bringing his thoughts back to a healthier channel.

"They may refuse to let me go now," he said one day. "Fabian is married, and Dal is on foreign service, and there are only the little boys."

"Do you hope they will ask you to stay?"

"Oh, no ; as the time goes on, I fret against the delay."

"Well, your father and mother are not old enough to need anyone's help particularly. If I were you, I should speak to your father plainly."

He looked fixedly at her.

"I have your permission to be off, evidently," he said. "Is it 'the sooner the better'?"

"I have nothing to do with it," she replied; adding, after a moment's hesitation, "except to wish you success and happiness."

"I heard from Lathom to-day," he continued, pulling a letter out of his pocket as he spoke. "Our offered services are all accepted and our districts mapped out. Lathom and I are to be together on the Queensland track, which embraces eight hundred miles of country, very sparsely cultivated. There are three hundred and fifty families to visit, separated by scrub and water, and gullies and forest. There is but one township in all that extent, where we shall have our headquarters. It has no church and no parson. Lathom and I will take the district in turn, the one *remaining in the township* to get up a school, and do what can be

done to influence the rough section of the townspeople. Does it seem a dreadful life ? ”

“ Oh, no—a noble one ! ”

“ Thank you, dear. Do you mind being called dear ? ”

She ignored the question.

“ It will be a rough life,” she said ; “ but as long as you are well, it will be enjoyable, too. And, then, what scope there is for doing good ! and you need not stay there forever. When you have put things in training, others can follow you.”

“ And you will be glad to see me back again ? ”

“ What a question ! ”

“ Shall you ? ”

“ Of course—if I am at home.”

“ What do you mean, Urania ? Is it possible ? Are you thinking of some fellow all this time, and—and—— ? ”

Her face turned hot till her very eyes suffered from the heat. “ Oh, you silly boy ! ” she cried. “ Don’t you think girls can have high aims, too ? Do you think we are all satisfied to spend our lives over tennis and novels ? Why are you men to go out and fight against ill and wrong, and we girls be content to sit at home at ease ? I believe you think ‘ fellows ’ are the one end and aim of our lives.”

“ Then what do you mean ? You mean something. I insist upon knowing.”

“ Insist, indeed ! ”

“ Ranny, dearest, I tell you everything ; I look to you in everything. In all this miserable time, you have made life endurable to me. Don’t be unkind now. What is it you are hinting at ? Why shouldn’t you be at home when I come back ? ”

She remained silent.

“ If you only knew—if you only—— Oh, I don’t know how to keep from speaking,” he continued, bending forward to bring his face nearer to hers. “ But I have no business to take advantage of your goodness. It would be base to fetter you ; it would be an unpardonable breach of confidence toward your father.”

He waited to watch her eagerly. His heart and conscience were at variance. He could not loose her ; he ought not to bind her ; only, if she loved him, something was due to her feelings. If she had other plans, something was due to him. He waited hours, it seemed to him, watching the downcast face that gave no sign. Then, all at once, light came ; her eyes, bright with fun, were *flashed up at him*. She held out both her hands, and cried :

"What a fuss to make about nothing at all!"

The young man's pulses had almost ceased to throb with dread of what he was about to hear, and now these commonplace words dropped him down from the sublime to the ridiculous. He took her hands because they were extended toward him, and he held them tight because he liked to have them; but he took no encouragement from the action.

"Nothing at all to you," he managed to say reproachfully.

"And to you," she murmured.

"Everything."

She smiled softly.

"Perhaps I chose the wrong words," she said. "I meant to say there was no occasion for you to suppose I cared for any other but—— I mean to say, I ought to have said——"

She broke off confused, and tried to withdraw her hands; but he took courage as she lost hers, and spoke up at last decidedly.

"Listen, dear. I love you; I have always loved you; I shall always love you; but you are a beautiful young lady, and I am a poor wandering missionary. I can only say, Will you wait a few years till I go out on an uncertain expedition, from which, if I ever do return, I may return broken in health and spirits? Remember Aunt Issy's 'bad bargain.' Remember your father's disappointment, if you throw yourself away on me, and tell me to go, and never cross your path again."

"I shall do no such thing," she replied. "Aunt Issy and Mr. Truman are happy as happy can be. I think you will look very nice when you are as old as he was, and come back for me. You are too thin now. Mr. Truman was comfortably stout. You will take nice little quick steps instead of long strides, with which I can never keep pace, you know; and if I like to wait I should like to know what business anyone else has to be disappointed?"

She laughed, but there were tears in her eyes. George drew nearer; his whole soul was stirred. He had done his utmost to warn her against himself. He could not be expected to dash the cup of life from his lips.

"But what did you mean just now?" he asked, still fearing.

"Do you recollect when Mr. Lathom was here, and you looked at us so suspiciously because we danced so much together? Well, I was hearing about his and your scheme, and how his sister was to learn nursing and then go out to him and help in the township, or *wherever she was wanted*; and he said he hoped others would

join her in time, and form a sisterhood to teach and nurse too ; and I intend, as soon as you have gone, to go to a hospital and learn all sorts of things."

"My dear child—you in a hospital ! Have you any idea of the work ?"

"Oh, yes, indeed I have. You are treated horribly at first, to try your mettle ; nearly broken down by scrubbing—to make one's hands softer and nicer, I suppose ! I should like to know why medical students are not treated so. Is it because they are of the weaker sex ?"

"Holloa, Ranny ! you are not going in for woman's rights ?"

She laughed. "Ah, well ! lady nurses *are* treated like charwomen at the hospitals at first ; nevertheless, for the survival of the fittest, I suppose. But I shouldn't care, just for a time."

"And then ?"

"And then I meant to ask Miss Lathom to take me on her staff ; and some day you and I would meet, and——"

"And what, my darling ?"

"Oh, I don't know. Besides, it doesn't matter. I can learn when I get out there, now."

"May I ask you when you propose to go ?"

"Don't you go next autumn—September, is it ?"

"Urania, you are distinctly proposing to me !"

"George, take your arm away. Go and sit down. I revoke all I said. Go ! I have changed my mind. If you don't go and sit down—there—at the other side of the room, I will change my mind."

The threat made him obedient. He seated himself where he was told, and, with the width of the room between them, they settled their future plans. He was to be ordained on Trinity Sunday ; his time at the theological college would be up in June ; his time in the workshops, where he was learning to be Jack-of-all-trades, would end in August. But—for there was a "but" which he feared—his parents might require him to postpone his departure ; and if they should, he felt he ought to make the concession ; only, if so, his marriage would have to be delayed.

"All the better," she said ; "he would then have more time to make up his mind."

"It's been made up for years," he retorted, "so far as you are concerned. I suppose I may come across now ? I'm tired of shouting."

"I can hear you perfectly," she replied. "If you move, I shall have to go. Only think, if anyone came in—how absurd!"

Someone did come in—the two little boys.

"Holloa!" cried Harold. "Have you two quarrelled, or are you playing some game?"

"George, I want you to come and hold my broken-legged magpie," cried Arthur; "its splints want retying."

"Oh, that wretched magpie!" cried Urania. "Toby, isn't it dead yet?"

"I mended the poor frog's leg," Toby said. "You know I did, Urania; and the poor duck, too; why, it hardly even limps."

"Oh, yes, Doctor Toby, so you did," she exclaimed. "I'll come and hold the bird, shall I?"

"You dear Urania!" the little boy replied. "But I nearly forgot to tell you Tanny and Anny are waiting outside; and they said, 'Toby' they said, 'tell Ranny, if she's done spooning, she's to come.'"

Harold flew out of the room with one impish look at his big brother. George seized Toby. "Did they say that?—honor bright."

"George, don't pinch. No, the girls didn't."

"Who did?"

"Let me go."

"Who did?"

"Well, then, it was Harold. The girls they said Ranny was to hurry up. Harold he said—you know what."

"Only let me catch him!" George cried.

It was not surprising that Mr. Marleon objected to Urania's choice. "Not as George Vernon," he said, "but as a poor missionary." As for her going out to a township—he uttered the word scornfully, a hot-bed of vice—it was not to be thought of. Let the young man stay at home, and settle in a nice living, and he shall have the girl; but Urania nursing drunken ruffians while George wandered out of ken preaching to clodhoppers, who wouldn't give him a thank you for his pains—the thing was absurd. If she wanted work, let her work in Cotley. Was there ever an engagement carried out and happily merged into matrimony without some such trials and worries? Urania was very quiet and respectful while her father vetoed her desires; but, to her step-mother, who, as George's aunt, was of course on the girl's side, she emphatically *protested against* altering her determination; to her sisters she

was more explicit still. She was not going to follow in Aunt Issy's footsteps. As soon as she was of age, she should take the law into her own hands ; and Titania and Constantia thought her quite right.

All this weary debate roused George's father and mother. Amy was delighted that George should have a wife to look after him ; a wife, too, after her own heart, and Mr. Vernon was annoyed his old friend should consider George ineligible.

The father had learnt to admire the young man's strength of character, and to respect his earnestness. He no longer talked of "the lad throwing himself away in the wilds"; the sorrow and suffering of the last few months had changed his views about worldly distinction ; he was no longer so certain success was always outward and visible, nor was he so sure the distinctions of the world were invaluable. During his sorrow, a great honor had been conferred on him in recognition of his services in India. He had looked forward to its acquisition as to the crowning of his life's work ; but—as is so often the case, when what we covet at last comes to us—it brought but a momentary thrill of pleasure. When his wife's pleasure had been expressed, and his friends had congratulated him, what more was there in it ? It could not take away one iota of his regret ; nay, it rather added to it, as he thought how Will would have exulted over it. And when Mr. Marleon, coming to consult what was to be done with "these two inconsequent young people," told him he really ought to forbid George throwing away his chances, he forgot all his own former vexation, and promptly replied, "He was proud and thankful to have such a son."

Mr. Marleon repeated this to his wife. He was hurt and surprised as well ; but Gertrude understood how her brother's mind was changing, and realized why ; and she reasoned away the momentary annoyance against his old friend. But George did not succeed in getting himself acknowledged as Urania's *fiancé*, for while Mr. Marleon refused consent Mr. Vernon would not give his.

CHAPTER XXXI

"POOR WILL'S CHUM"

WHEN George left home to take up his work again, he had Urania's promise only. Mr. Marleon bade him a friendly good-by, but remained obdurate. His parents would say nothing, either; but he felt sure of their consent, and so was fain to be content to wait and hope. Urania never altered in her affectionate manner to her father; but neither did she alter in her determination to fulfil her engagement as soon as she was of age. She told him so, very calmly and respectfully, when the matter was first mooted, and her tone was very firm.

"She has her mother's will," he had told Gertrude, "as well as her mother's eyes. I never knew poor Bella give up anything she had determined upon; but I can be firm, too."

"Quite a domestic tyrant," she had replied, with a happy laugh. "I like firm characters, but not obstinate ones. I never have any patience with people like the Medes and Persians, who never altered a silly, obsolete law, because they boasted their laws were perfect from the beginning, and to alter them would have proved the reverse—have you?"

"Of course not; progression or circumstances must necessitate change," and thus Gertrude played her little part toward undermining his will.

The very day Urania came of age she went to her father's writing room, and told him she wished to enter as nurse at the Cotley Infirmary. She put a little packet of papers before him as she spoke, proving that she was already in correspondence with the authorities, and that nothing remained to be done but to send in an application for immediate admission. When he had realized this unexpected situation, he looked at her in utter consternation.

"Does Gertrude know of this?" he asked.

He liked his girls to call her mamma, but he never called her "your mother" to them. So much was due, he felt, to the poor dead woman, though she had failed to grasp her motherly duties aright.

"No one knows of it."

"Not even one of the Vernons?" He did not look at her as he said so. "One of the Vernons" meant George only, of course, and so she understood it.

"No one knows of it in either family," she replied. "I have long wished to learn how to be of use."

"You are very useful at home, my dear."

His kindness nearly broke her down; but with an effort she kept calm, smiling as she said:

"But there are the other girls, and mamma. I mean I should like to know how to act in sickness, to be of real use in real need."

"Can't you learn without going into a hospital? You don't know what you will have to bear—sights and sounds and smells revolting to a girl like you."

"You and I will be sick and ill some day, papa. We shan't like to suppose we are objects of aversion. I suppose nurses lose sense of the disagreeables in the pleasure of softening suffering."

"But, dear love, I don't like it."

"Dr. Pritchard has done a great deal to let me down lightly, papa. I am only to be day-nurse, at first, so I shall be at home all night; and when I take night duty—not for some time, that—you'll have me all day. I have always wished to learn how to make poultices and put on bandages."

She laughed lightly. Her father looked at her as she stood before him in the prime of her youth. A graceful, beautiful girl, with the charm of refinement over her.

"A hospital nurse!" he cried. "Ugh!"

"Ah, wait till you see the pretty dress!" she exclaimed.

"Don't fancy I'm going to be a sort of Sairey Gamp."

He threw his hands out before him with a gesture of despair. "To wash dirty, disreputable creatures!" he continued. "No, no; I can't bear it. Think of your education, child. How much was it your mother used to say it cost? And you to cast all aside, and become a drudge in a hospital! No, I cannot consent."

"I am of age, papa."

There was no defiance in her tone, yet it was very firm, and again he was reminded of the dead wife.

Her marriage with George seemed to him more desirable than the carrying out of this plan, and he asked in despair:

"*But what about that other plan, which only a while ago was in the ascendant?*"

She knew what he meant, and her answer made him wince.

"This work is to make the other easier, papa," she said.

An angry exclamation was on his lips, but he felt immediately how he had made the trap himself, for himself, and turned it off into a laugh.

"Nonsense, nonsense!" he cried. "Oh, my dear girl, you don't know what you want to do; you have no experience; you are not fitted for such a life as you propose. It is a wild, chimerical, visionary scheme of universal benevolence on his side. It would be a voluntary leaping down into the mud and mire of life on yours. Wait, I beg of you to wait, till matured judgment enables you to understand the fitness of things."

She made a little gesture of dissent, but would not argue, merely saying:

"I am not such a thin-skinned, fine lady as to be unable to look at suffering. You surely allow it is a woman's work to wait on the sick, and therefore best she should understand what she has to do?"

He got up from his chair, and pulled his gloves on rapidly. Usually he did nothing on the spur of the moment; but on great occasions he could act sharply, and without counsel.

"I am going out," he said. "Wait till later for my decision, though I fear it is only a matter of form to you now."

He passed out of the room and the house without consulting his wife, who, hearing him leave the house, came to enquire where he had gone. Then Urania told her all.

On that same day, young Osborne arrived at the Vernons'. He had written a kindly, impulsive letter when Will died, and the answer had begged him to come to Cotley, if he was ever in the neighborhood.

Mrs. Vernon longed to see her dead boy's friend; the resemblance between the young men would be painful to notice, but also comforting—a partial answer to the yearning to look on the dead face again, which so often possessed her. But when he was before her, she saw nothing to recall the lost one. The height and figure and complexion might be the same; but the man of five-and-twenty, with mustache, and an immensity of self-assurance, bore little resemblance to the slim youth of five years ago. Amy had dreaded, while she desired, this visit, and now that the young man was before her, her dread vanished.

For Will's dear sake he was welcome. Will's room was pre-

pared for him. Will's boyish treasures and prizes were there displayed. She took a great liking to him even before she penetrated beneath the absurdity of his acquired manner and speech ; for on her first entering the drawing room, he had for the moment forgotten his affectations, and had poured out his sympathy naturally and affectionately, but had stiffened up again when Mr. Vernon entered, with the recollection of the burra-sahibship, which had formerly placed a great though imaginary barrier between the subs and his paramount position.

When all had been said, all questions answered, and Dalrymple's letters on the fatal accident read, Mrs. Vernon began to wonder how she was to entertain this dashing young man. Entertainment, in the common acceptation of the word, had not entered her mind ; she had wholly connected him with Will. He was to remind her of Will, to talk to her of Will, to be in Will's stead, as it were. But at luncheon of this the first of the three days he had come to spend with her, she remembered more than two years had passed since he and Will had met ; that many new interests must have arisen to him in that time ; and that at his age, even though fidelity of memory may remain perfect, new hopes and new friends are happily possible and right.

As she remembered this other thoughts stirred in her. Her little boys, sitting opposite the newcomer, were evidently struck with him once or twice. Harold nearly choked with suppressed laughter ; and Arthur, misunderstanding what was said, and answering wildly, was crimson with apprehension. Formerly they would have looked at her to join in their amusement, and expected her help to keep them straight, but now they looked at each other only ; and once, when by chance Arthur looked at her, it was clearly to be seen that it was in fear.

It was a salutary awakening to the poor mother. Was she becoming unmindful of the living in useless brooding over the dead ? The expression of the child's eyes pierced her heart. There was no longer the sure, glad, sympathetic glance ; the voices were hushed before her as they had never been hushed before, and she had failed to notice the difference. She took a large red strawberry, and put it on Arthur's plate, eager to make amends as soon as she saw her fault.

He looked up in quick surprise and thanked her, not with the *joyful shout* he would once have uttered, but with the hushed *manner of his new departure*. "Thanks, dear mother," he said

primly, instead of what would formerly have been, "Oh, mammy, how jolly!"

She flushed up—every word became a revelation to her of her own shortcomings. When luncheon was finished they at once went away—the one back to school, the other to the garden. Toby had left her entirely out of his plans.

"Toby," she called to him presently, when she was showing her guest the garden, "Toby, go and get tidy; we are going to take Urania's birthday-present; you can come too."

He flew up to her. "Come too! With you?" he cried. "Really! Are you sure you can do with me?"

She stooped and kissed him. "I can always do with you, darling," she replied.

"Oh, I'm so glad you're better!" he said with a deep sigh, and off he ran to be tidied.

Mr. Osborne turned to her. "I seem to know the Miss Marleons," he said. "I suppose you have a little society here?"

"Cotley is very proud of its pretty girls," Mr. Vernon replied. "You shall see some this afternoon." He looked at his wife doubtfully as he added, "Don't you think we might arrange to let Osborne have some tennis here to-morrow?"

"Ah, that would be quite jolly!" Mr. Osborne cried; while Amy's eyes dilated with horror at the idea of mirth and gayety only six months after her loss. But her new feelings came before she had time to answer, and her guest's quick remark also helped her.

"Yes, certainly," she made herself say, wondering at herself at the same time. As they walked to the Marleons', she said, aside, to her husband, "You don't mean a party, William?"

"No, no; but we must make Will's friend happy, dear."

That idea struck her forcibly. Of course Will's friend must be considered first. The Marleon girls were amazed to receive a pressing invitation to tennis.

"Are you sure, dear Mrs. Vernon, it won't be too—" Urania began, but stopped at the pressure of her step-mother's fingers on her arm.

Aunt Gertrude showed no surprise. "Amy doesn't play," she cried hastily; "therefore, how can it be too much for her? We were saying only at luncheon, just now, it is time someone started tennis; and your lawn is so much better than ours."

Amy felt she was not considered premature, and was comforted.

Meantime Mr. Osborne had elaborately bowed to each girl as he

was presented to her—a bow which was compounded of a forward duck of the head and a sudden jerk of the body from the waist. He then elaborately polished a rimless eye-glass, placed it with some difficulty in his right eye, and deliberately surveyed each of them through it. He assumed then all the “side” available, remembering he had to concentrate the importance of his regiment in his own person, and, as a preliminary to further acquaintance, having assumed a killing attitude in front of them, he enquired, addressing the three collectively :

“Pat-ball takes the cake heaw, ’suppose?”

He bore the amused scrutiny of all the six pretty eyes unflinchingly.

Urania dare not trust herself to speak. Constantia drew herself up to her full height, a height which placed her head on a level with his.

“We are country girls,” she said with the utmost dignity. “If that’s slang, we don’t understand it.”

“Haw! well, no, it’s not slang; we pride ourselves on never speaking slang. It’s bad form; we leave it to the Smugs.”

“The Smugs?”

“Haw! I’m shor that’s plain enough. Have you no garrison within hail? Happy people, to be out of the sound of trumpets—though, to be shor, Smugs use bugles.”

“Really we don’t understand you.”

“Do you mean to say, reawllly and trully, you don’t know ‘Smug’ stands for a linesman?”

“Never heard of it before.” Each girl shook her head as his eyes went from one to the other for corroboration. He changed his attitude, using his little cane for a backboard, and thus facing them, he said with much unctiousness :

“Delightfully refreshing!” Upon which Urania and Titania turned suddenly round and became deeply interested in Toby, while Constantia stood her ground.

“You were poor Will Vernon’s chum!” she said.

“Ah, yes, poor fellow.”

“We haven’t seen him, of course, since he first went out; he was such a jolly boy. Did he grow conceited afterward?”

“Oh, no, not in my day. Dragoons are nevar conceited.”

“Are you a dragoon?”

He changed his glass with much solemnity to the other eye before he answered:

"Haw! Why, what *do* you think I am?"

"We know nothing about soldiers, you know; we only know of you as poor Will's friend."

"For his sake first; for my own, I hope, afterward—eh?"

"I wish you'd remember we are country girls, and speak to us in plain, unvarnished speech. Have you ever read Scott's 'Monastery?'"

"Apropos of what?" he observed calmly. "Does anyone read Scott now except schoolboys?" But she fancied the uncovered eye gave a slight flash. "And why do you persist in calling yourselves country girls? I'm shor the Row would receive additional chawm by your presence."

She made a bob courtesy, and her father came up to propose a game.

"Old ones against young ones!" he cried. "One of you girls take Mr. Osborne. Vernon, let you and me beat them, eh?"

So it was settled. The two seniors placed themselves opposite Constantia and Mr. Osborne, the rest seated themselves at a safe distance and criticised the play. It is to be feared the two girl onlookers found a great deal of amusement out of the visitor's movements.

"I ashor you," he was telling his partner, "I know nothing about it. We are not allowed to play; positively, it's against our rules!"

"No? Why, it's not dangerous, if you are commonly careful!"

"You shorely don't suppose——"

"Play!" cried one of the elders.

He missed the serve, but Tanny took it, and for a time there was no opportunity for talk. She played well, darting gracefully here and there, forward and backward, with unerring aim, ready for her father's sneaky drops just over the net when she was expecting a far stroke, and returning volley for volley unweariedly. Her partner soon showed he was out of practice, so she took the game into her own hands, except when he was bound to make an effort. Once his balls were scattered, and he looked at her as if expecting she would get them for him.

"Cotley girls only pick up their own balls," she explained, seeing his expectation. "And then not when they play with men."

"Play!" again sounded from the other side.

The game was lost. "You did your best, Tanny," her father said. "You are out of practice, Osborne."

"I am. Haven't played for y'ars ; we are not allowed. It's not in our line, you know."

"No?"

"No. We can do as we like away from the regiment, but we must not play it when we are in barracks."

"But why? Is it too hard work?" The speaker's eyes were full of fun.

His guest turned on him. "My dear sir!" he cried, "it isn't work enough. We go in for polo, and for rackets, and for cricket—but lawn-tennis for a dragoon, oh, no!" He shook his head, and appeared shocked at the mere idea. "It's a nice mild little game for—ladies," and he bowed profoundly round at the girls—"and for—civilians—who use their brains so much," here he bowed profoundly at the two elders; "but we dragoons!"—he smiled and again shook his head sagely—"for us—oh, no!"

"Then I am sure," said Tanny demurely, "we ought to be very pleased that you condescend to the game now. Would you like any more? Fanny plays better than I do; she shall be your partner this time."

Mrs. Fabian came in just before the new set began, and he and she found they had met at Malta when the trooper was taking the dragoons out to India; they had even played tennis together.

"You were a first-rate player, I recollect," she said.

"Ah, I was a boy then," he rejoined. "Our fellahs used to put me forward then; but since we came home, we find that sort of thing won't do; it lowers the tone of fellahs, you know."

"She's a pretty creashaw," he said afterward to Tanny in the pauses of the game. "Married a brother of Will's, eh? Romantic affair, wasn't it? One of our fellows had a brother in her father's battery—that's how I came to hear of it. Pretty creashaw, very. Are all the Cotley girls pretty?"

"When Fabian was a midddy, he was a good deal at Malta," she said, evading the question. "He's such a handsome man. Will was very handsome."

"He was. You know we were as like as two peas."

She laughed so heartily that he joined in, but evidently without seeing the joke.

"I can't think how a fellah can be a sailor," he said next. "Such a narrow life. We always avoid them. But, then, you *can't* expect a dragoon to chum up with a sailor."

She stared at him as she ran forward to return a sneak, which

was very successful. "If only one could remember good answers at the time," she added afterward to herself, "I could have retorted 'No; well, of course, sailors are very exclusive.' I think that would have killed him, though."

There was a little dispute about a ball. Mr. Vernon held one opinion, Mr. Osborne another. The latter got quite excited.

"My dear sir!" he cried, emphasizing his words with his racket, "if you'll look at your rules, when you go home, you'll find I'm right. I ashore you I'm right."

"A queer chap!" Mr. Marleon said aside to his partner.

"A good young fellow at heart," Mr. Vernon replied, "spoilt since he came home; but not more than skin deep. He's come into a fine property, too, lately. His head's a little bit turned; but a good lad at heart—like our poor Will, too."

And Amy sat looking on, and once more taking part in the bright side of life, as much to her own astonishment as to her friends'. They were very careful to take it as a matter of course, and judiciously refrained from paying her extra attention, and so she sat among them again, smiling almost as of old.

She had never worn crape for her boy, nothing but black, and no one could accuse her of being wanting in love for the dead, though Cotley had commented upon the absence of the usual trimming. So now she could more easily take her old place without appearing like the skeleton at the feast. Arthur was much struck by her changed manner. Every now and then she met his eyes; every now and then he came close to her, as if to be sure she was the old smiling mother again.

"Toby is very lively," Aunt Gertrude said, without a suspicion of the truth. "I have been meaning to advise you to give him a tonic, but he seems very well again to-day. I don't like to see a child of his age dull and silent. Once or twice I feared Harold might be beginning his old tricks again."

"He'll never do that again," Amy declared energetically. "That lesson will never be forgotten. Harold will be a great man some day—a good man."

"I've never heard him speak of that time," Gertrude said; "but he told mother all about it, poor boy! Mother says he wept when he told her."

"He's not spoken about it for a long time," Amy said; "only once or twice, when I've gone to tuck him up last thing at night, he's said, 'Oh, I'm so glad to be here;,' and I knew what he was meaning."

The young people won the next set. Mr. Osborne was probably stung into making an effort ; at all events, he played so well that Constantia told him condescendingly he might make a fairly good player if he practised, to which he replied very gravely :

"Haw, I'm shore you mean kindly."

That evening, when Amy went to the study, where the boys sat together preparing their lessons, she overheard the following from Toby :

"Harry, guess! I heard mamma laugh to-day at Aunt Gerty's——"

"I say, did you truly? Oh, I am glad. Let's hope she's forgotten Bill, now. What a long time she's been."

"I'm glad, too. I hope no one else won't die ; it's so dull, you know."

"I hope *she* won't die."

"Harry! of course she won't. You shouldn't say such things. Why, papa's older than her ; and look at granny, she's older than him. Oh, I dare say she remembers the ark and Noah ; but *she* isn't going to die, even."

Harold roared with laughter.

"She isn't," Toby repeated. "I'll tell you how I know. I heard her tell Smith she was going to buy a new bonnet, and you know her bonnets last ever so long. I heard Aunt Gerty tell her she wears them till they're rusty. She said they looked as if they'd come out of the ark—she did."

CHAPTER XXXII

MATRIMONIAL

URANIA was suspicious of her father's good spirits. He had come home to luncheon quite restored to his usual geniality, but had vouchsafed no enlightenment as to what he had been doing ; only when they were saying good-night, he stopped her as she was following her sisters.

"I saw Dr. Pritchard this morning," he said. "We have arranged you shall visit the children's ward for three hours daily. On these terms I consent to your going, but I emphatically refuse

any others. Now be silent, Urania ; say what you think proper to-morrow. Sleep on it to-night."

He kissed her and dismissed her, and she made no attempt to speak to him further.

She discussed it with her sisters, though, and they were quite on their father's side ; neither of them had any leaning toward nursing. " I wonder you can propose such a thing," they told her. " Fancy how disgusting to have to clear away bits of arms and legs, and to be ordered about by medical students—horrid young men ! Why, they have to eat with the same hands they cut people in pieces with ! "

Urania laughed. " You are talking like geese," she said. " But I own I am relieved, after all ; it was awful to think of—and children are different, though I would endure anything to enable me to be of real use with George."

Then they discussed Mr. Osborne ; their criticism was very severe. Constantia called him " a perfect ape," and imitated his drawl and slow, emphatic speech. " Poor Bill was not a bit like that when we knew him," Urania said ; " but perhaps it's a way dragoons have. I'm glad I don't know any more of them ; and he is so satisfied to be one ! "

" Well, Urania ? " Mr. Marleon said next morning.

" Well, papa," she replied, smiling, " I accept your terms for a beginning at all events."

" Dr. Pritchard has no vacancy just now," he added. " There won't be one till the early autumn." He watched her narrowly.

" That will do well," was her answer ; and he was content. She had evidently given up her wild intention of going out with George.

As she had. Thinking it all over, she clearly saw she would be a hindrance instead of a help to him until he had gained some experience of the work. Another year would enable her, too, to acquire practical knowledge of her duties as a missionary's wife, and she was fortunately so unlike her poor mother in that she was essentially practical. It must never be said, she argued, that George tied his hands by making a too early marriage. She would make herself a helpmeet for him, never be an encumbrance.

George came the next day to make acquaintance with " Poor Will's chum." Mr. Osborne was greatly taken with him. " *What a splendid dragoon he would have made !*" he remarked

to Amy. "What a shame he should be lost in the wilds!" And George took to him for Will's sake, nor did he laugh when Constantia gave him a private imitation of the young man's peculiarities. George fancied he saw glints of Will in him; and, beside, he was too well accustomed to superlative "side" at college to think that much amiss.

The young people had a long, happy day together, chaperoned by Mrs. Fabian. After breakfast, they went on the river, when the visitor showed skill in rowing—the regiment did not object to that manly exercise, though they preferred the smallest and frailest of wherries. However, with a party of ladies, safety and ease had to be considered, as he acknowledged, and he rose in the girls' esteem by his good style in handling the sculls.

He was quick to understand George's love affair. "Evidently runs in the family," he told Fay privately. "Will was quite a ladies' man. We are not a marrying lot—girls expect too much attention."

"I thought it was the other way," Mrs. Fabian demurely remarked.

But he never appeared to notice an adverse sentiment, and presently he told them about Miss Lester. She was still unmarried—her last engagement was broken off by the colonel discovering the young man's expectations were visionary. "He threatened her with a court martial," he added. "No, I mean the other thing, you know—breach of promise. I must own he was a hound, so we made the mess too hot for him. Fancy a dragoon court-martialing—no, breach-of-promising a lady! We really couldn't have held up our heads again."

"Was she a *nice* girl?"

"Now, reawllly, Miss Marleon, are not all girls nice? Well, she's not one of my favorites, I admit; the dragoons are not proud of her, though she's pretty. Yes, poor Will and I used, in our youth, to admire her; but it's a bad thing for a regiment to have ladies in it who are fond of admiration."

The girls looked at each other. Constantia longed to enquire if the regiment could spare none from themselves, but prudently refrained. They became very friendly together—the long afternoon in the garden—the informal outdoor tea, and the evening stroll after dinner, brought ease even to the newcomer.

"*He is either dropping his 'side,' or we are getting accustomed to it,*" the girls said.

With Mr. Vernon, quietly smoking together, the Osborne of Wattibuldi was uppermost ; his voice and his figure in the half-light of evening recalled his companion's dead boy vividly. The young man laid aside his acquired manner, and laughed and talked just as he and Will had laughed and talked in that far-off veranda of the Residency. He opened his heart to Mr. Vernon as Will used to open his heart, and told him of his people and his prospects. "And I only found out the other day," he said, "I got my thumping legacy entirely through Will."

He had a bachelor cousin—a mere second or third cousin—who made his will in his favor, in the belief that he had led the assault on the rajah's gun. He had seen his name in the paper ; but not the contradictory report, and he had died undeceived very soon after.

"It came out the other day, when I was at his lawyer's," Mr. Osborne said. "He congratulated me on my laurels, which I failed to see, and, after some questioning, I discovered what he meant. I really was afraid the will couldn't be valid ; but he laughed and said I was very lucky, and needn't be afraid to enjoy my luck. The fact is, Allen Carter was a queer, dissatisfied, restless fellow, and fancied all his relations coveted his money. He'd never heard of my existence till that fort affair. He seems to have made no further enquiries, but to have gone straight to the lawyer's and made his will."

"Allen Carter," Mr. Vernon repeated. "Why, that was the man who came home with us six or seven years ago—a nice fellow ; but, as you say, a restless rover. How very strange ! We liked him very well, and meant to see more of him, but were unable. Ah, well, no one would be better pleased than Will."

"I'm sure of it."

Of course George and Urania had a talk together, and of course George did his best to convince her against her better reason that she must go out with him. At the same time, he acknowledged that Lathom had strongly advised him to go out first unmarried. "But, then," he added, "Lathom has never been in love, and I doubt if he ever will be ; though, to do him justice, his reasons are not so much for my good as for yours. He read me a regular sermon, condemning me as horridly selfish."

Urania smiled up at him. "He knows nothing about you, then !" she exclaimed.

"I only wish, with all my heart," George cried, "his turn would come ; then we should hear another tale."

When George had gone again, Mr. Osborne, as a matter of course, was the cavalier of the girls' boating and walking parties. He was much struck to find they had their before-breakfast swim in the river baths. He thought present-day girls never got up till the middle of the morning. He met Titania riding with her father, "altogether turned out fit for the Row," he told Amy.

"Oh, they are all perfect horsewomen," said she, already seeing a possible husband for one of the younger girls in this dear friend of Will's; "but they only keep two saddle-horses, so they go out by turns. Constantia is about the most daring, I think; she can take her horse over a fence like a bird."

"Surely Marleon is rich enough to keep them a horse apiece."

"Ah, wait till you have a wife and three girls! Why, that would be six horses, for they have two for the carriage. He is very well off; but you want riches for such a lot of horses."

"Ah, I shall never marry."

She laughed. "I've heard a good many men say that," she exclaimed. "However, it will be soon enough for you to think about it ten years hence."

"Ten years hence! Why, I shall be an old foggy! Your sailor son is younger than I am, I'm told."

"Ah, Fabian was imprudent; at least, I should say he is a very fortunate boy. His wife is a sweet girl. We are quite reconciled to his too early marriage."

"Will would have been a Benedict by now," he continued. "And if I may say so, your second son seems matrimonially inclined; perhaps an early marriage is good for a fellow, after all. You see, when the children grow up, it's best for them to have a youngish father; he's better able to put his foot down and hold his own."

"You are quite a professor on the subject!" she said, greatly amused.

"Well, of course we air all these subjects thoroughly in our mess. We have one or two soft-hearted fellows, and we do our best to keep them straight; but a soft-hearted youngster is often as obstinate as a mule. A very sad case occurred about a year ago: one of our subs, saying nothing to a soul, got married the very day after he was twenty-one, on nothing but his pay. I give you my word! and to a milliner's girl! Well, of course we couldn't let him stay with us, after that; so we sent round the hat, and made *him* exchange. Smugs are not so particular as dragoons, of course *not*; and we furnished his barrack-room to start them. Such a

carpet we gave 'em, last them a life ; and an awful 'suite'—we let her choose it. You know the sort—*rep* sofa and six chairs, and what you call a loo table, and then she fancied some lustres, jingling things, you know, always chipping themselves. Oh, you never saw such a room !” He shuddered at the recollection.

“But that is an exceptional case.”

“Oh, I don't know. However, it behooves us to set the youngsters a good example, so we stamp out all matrimonial tendencies unsparingly. Dragoons, as a rule, aint impressionable.”

He suffered himself to be persuaded to stay on some days after his time ; and, for a man who did not care for girls, he seemed perfectly satisfied to do nothing but wait upon them, and when at last he left, it was with the assurance that he was quite sorry to go, and hoped he might be allowed to come again whenever his military duties allowed.

“Foolish boy !” Mrs. Fabian said, when the girls repeated his farewell words. “As if everyone doesn't know the attraction. But I can't tell which of you it is, Anny or Tanny.”

They looked at each other and laughed, and Anny's cheek's went of a deeper pink than Tanny's.

On Trinity Sunday George was ordained. His father and mother went to look on without letting him know, lest they should come between him and the solemnity ; and a week later he came home accompanied by Mr. Lathom.

When they were back at Cotley, Mr. Osborne arrived, “being wishful,” he explained, “to take a few sketches in the neighborhood.” Then, for many days, the spirit of picnics and tennis possessed the young people. There was a long spell of fine weather, “just the weather for outdoor sketching,” Fay told Mr. Osborne, and certainly his drawing block and pencils always accompanied him, but no one ever saw any result. It was Mr. Lathom's farewell visit. He was going in advance of George to take up the mission quarters.

“Such a pity, you know,” the dragoon told him, “to waste all your cultshaw on squatters. A fellow of half your size would do just as well, and reawly we can't let all our wisdom leave us. I might just as reasonably go and be a private. Come and join *us* ; you'll find work among us, I've no doubt.”

Amy sat aside and watched, and thus she saw clearly what was going on.

“You are like Mr. Osborne,” she said to Mr. Lathom the last

morning of his visit, as they found themselves the only occupants of the breakfast room. "You don't approve of matrimony?"

"Premature matrimony," he said correctly.

"But you must not try and persuade George to defer his marriage beyond a year," she continued. "I am too fond of Miss Marleon to desire to see her pine away, and I am very suspicious of you. He thinks very highly of your judgment, and might be guided by it."

"Mrs. Vernon, *you* misjudge me in advising George to defer his marriage. I really do so for the young lady's sake."

She laughed. "Ah," she said, "I have known cases like yours, men who flaunted their celibacy, and talked of the folly of spoiling their career by marriage, becoming ardent worshippers of the little god of love. Perhaps your turn will come."

He remained silent. His face had turned red while she spoke; but then his tea was very hot, and he had drank some thoughtlessly.

"I was so thankful," she continued—"but perhaps I was selfish—thinking George would have that dear girl with him, to console him for leaving. She is so healthy and practical; she would not care for the discomfort; indeed, I think she would enjoy smoothing it away, and I verily believe *you* have persuaded her to put the marriage off."

Mr. Lathom was very much in earnest. He faced his hostess, and spoke in a tone which carried conviction with it.

"Indeed!" he exclaimed, "the postponement did not originate with me. I think George is a very lucky fellow. I revoke all I ever said about matrimony as a drag on a man's career. I believe a single life to be an incomplete life. Men are poor helpless creatures, when left to themselves. I have spoken as a fool and thought as a fool hitherto."

"Ah, now you are laughing at me," she replied.

George came into the room just as Mr. Lathom was about to reply, and very soon after breakfast the latter went away to commence his long journey for his long-planned mission. George and Mr. Osborne saw him to the station, and while they were away Constantia and Titania arrived.

"We want to speak to you, dear Aunt Amy," Constantia said. "Are you quite at liberty?"

"Not another picnic?" she replied. "I am quite ashamed to *be always* gadding about, never getting any needle-work done.

What is it? Yes, I'm always at liberty, when you've anything to say."

She seated herself between them with the kind motherly air natural to her in her intercourse with young people, and, looking smilingly from one to the other, waited for one of them to speak.

"You say it, Tanny," said the elder girl.

"Why shouldn't you?" said the other.

Then speaking together, with faces growing rosier as they spoke, Mrs. Vernon heard the, to her, astounding news.

"We've come straight to tell you—first—before anyone else."

"One at a time!" she cried.

"Well," Constantia added, shaking her head at her sister, to be silent. "We want to tell you we're engaged to—of course you can guess—to Mr. Osborne."

"What! both of you?" she exclaimed.

They laughed nervously. "No, no," Constantia continued, "of course not—I am. I used to laugh at him, I know; but you said yourself—you know you did—there was a great deal of good in him, and papa is quite pleased, actually he is; but perhaps that's because he's well off; but I thought he was a poor sub. Indeed, I don't care for his money."

"And what will Dal say?"

"Ah, now you know that was all nonsense. You will tell me you are glad, won't you?"

Mrs. Vernon kissed the girl fondly. She honestly believed in the worth of Will's chum, and she made Constantia happy by her unqualified approval.

"But," she added, "when you and Urania are both married, what is Tanny to do?"

"But Tanny will have Urania, don't you see?"

"But Urania has promised to go out in another year."

"So have I," Titania said shamefacedly. "Papa is quite willing; perhaps because he is rich, too. Did you know he is *very* rich? And it's so good of him to use his money in that way."

"Who is rich? Are you mixing someone up with your father?"

"Dear Aunt Amy, it's Mr. Lathom."

"Reawilly and truly," Constantia added, unconsciously mimicking her lover.

Constantia was much astonished to find Mrs. Vernon had expected some such finale with Mr. Osborne. "But you, Titania,"

she added, "and Mr. Lathom, why, you can hardly know each other by sight!"

"You forget he came here last winter," was the answer; "besides, we were like old friends, to begin with. And, dear Aunt Amy, don't think I'm silly, but it was such fun making him like me when he was telling everyone a priest should be able to devote himself wholly to his work, at least till middle life."

"I wouldn't have believed it of him!" Amy cried. "Of course, I saw he was glad to be with you; but I never, never thought he would eat his own words like this."

Titania clasped her hands in supreme content. "It was fun at first," she said; "but what should I have done, if he had gone without speaking? And it was only this morning, you know——"

"But you never suspected *me*?" Anny asked. "You know I always laughed at him. I never really thought I should care. I wonder if he will write and tell me the mess can't countenance his engagement?"

She laughed softly at her own nonsense, and Mrs. Vernon assured her she had suspected her from the first, because she had protested her indifference too strongly.

The girls had hardly gone out of sight when Mr. and Mrs. Marleon arrived.

"My dear friend," Mr. Marleon began, as soon as they had exchanged greetings, "here's an extraordinary illustration of the inevitable 'unexpected.' Osborne came in last night as cool as a cucumber, and demanded Constantia; and this morning, before breakfast, Lathom arrived. But he was very modest; indeed, he seemed to think Titania as far beyond his reach as the sun in the heavens. Nevertheless, he managed to convey his meaning pretty clearly. Really, it's too bad. What's the use of bringing up daughters for other men, eh?"

"You've had your fair share of other men's daughters," Gertrude said, laughing.

"Just think!" he cried, shaking his head at his wife. "Supposing you hadn't married me——"

"A rude way of putting it," she interrupted.

"Well," he corrected, "supposing I hadn't had the ineffable bliss of marrying you—is that right?—here should I be, in my old age, *actually* deserted."

"But you are not old, and you are not deserted," Gertrude put in.

"And between us three, Mrs. Vernon, Urania has more sense in

her little finger than the other girls have in their two heads—yet they are marrying money, and she——”

“Take care!” Amy cried. “*I* think she’s making the best match of the three ; ‘ them’s my sentiments.’”

“Lathom is actually a man of large property,” he added. “He’s very sensible, too ; he sees the necessity of making a good settlement on Titania, just as if he were a man of the world. If only this missionary craze would blow over, it would be a capital good match for Titania.”

“I’m the most to be pitied,” Gertrude exclaimed. “I thought the girls would be more comfortable if I looked after them ; and, after all, I shall be left without a companion.”

“Thank you for nothing,” said her husband. “However, they won’t all go at the same time ; we may keep Urania for many a year yet.” He said this somewhat defiantly, as he shook Amy’s hand in farewell.

“Don’t be too sure of that,” she retorted ; “we may be able to make George a handsome allowance, and then you’ll have no excuse for blighting their young affections.”

She repeated all the above to her husband, and he said, “I have thought it all over. George is a good fellow. I can’t make him what would be called a *handsome* allowance ; but he can have poor Will’s share added to his own. Dal will soon get into the Staff Corps, and need very little more from me. Harold won’t cost much for some years. You and I have no extravagant habits. Why shouldn’t we let him be happy ? Urania gets something of her mother’s. I think very likely Marleon will be lenient toward George, now the other girls are doing so well.”

And so it was. When George went away, he carried with him a promise that Urania and Titania should follow in another year. Both Mr. Lathom and Mr. Osborne had made a generous offer ; they begged their *fiancées*’ share of their mother’s money might be settled upon Urania. But both Urania and George could be generous, too ; they would not hear of such a thing ; indeed, Urania said truly when she declared she preferred to work for her living. So George went away, and she set to work in the hospital, while Constantia began elaborate preparations for her marriage.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE LAST

TITANIA became Mrs. Osborne in the early winter. The wedding was a very gay affair. Several distinguished dragoons attended, and expressed their unqualified approval of their brother officer's choice ; and a picked number of men from Mr. Osborne's troop came to Cotley to form a guard of honor to the bridal pair. Consequently, the bridegroom and his friends wore full-dress uniform, and every member of the girls' high school, besides all the Marleon girls' old schoolfellows, and numberless maid-servants, lost their hearts and neglected their duties for many days, so dazzling and fascinating was the show. Fabian Vernon came home on leave in the new year, and on his twenty-second birthday was made a father.

"The rummiest birthday-present ever made to me !" he exclaimed, as he regarded his firstborn. "It will last me all my life, so there's no occasion to give me another. I don't care about it at present ; but granny says it will be my greatest comfort some day, and that it's exactly like me. I'm not a vain fellow, but I know my face isn't as much like a dough dumpling as that thing's ; however, Fay seems to fancy it, so I'm content." And his mother, to whom he had brought his news, and who was inclined to sentimentalize over her first grandchild, could only laugh and lament his want of discernment.

Things in general conspired against Mr. Marleon. In the spring Miss Lee of Riverham died, and left what she had to leave to George. It was not much, but it made a very great addition to the young man's allowance, and, settled upon Urania, with her own modest *dot*, would make her comfortably independent should she be left a widow—a contingency which her father told her was a foregone conclusion.

But the strongest reason for Urania going out was that the sisters should travel together, and Mr. Lathom would not give his future wife one day more in England than had been bargained for. He wrote home that the township was no mere collection of shanties, but a rapidly rising place, already boasting an organized government, and with a church rapidly approaching completion. George told

how this church was built entirely at the cost of his friend, who had already instituted schools at his own expense. The climate agreed with both young men, and their separate houses would be ready by the time the girls came out. Beautiful drawings of these new buildings were duly sent home, embellished a little, no doubt, by the artists, who naturally made the best of the picture, even going to the length of showing roses climbing about the porches, and lace curtains veiling the windows. They had the grace, however, to say they were depicted more as they *would* appear than as they were at the present time.

So it came about that Mr. Marleon made no further objection to Urania's choice, and her outfit was prepared on the same scale as her sister's. Only his wife knew how greatly he felt the idea of the threefold loss. He grew sleepless, lost his appetite, and no longer cared to look up old friends. Gertrude loved him the more for his dejection, and it was she who thought of a plan to break the separation, and proposed, as cheerfully as she could, he should escort the travellers, and see them in their new homes.

"And you won't mind being left at home?" he asked.

She could not say no, so compromised by telling him his happiness was dearer to her than her own.

"But would you mind going, too?" he added.

"How should I object to go anywhere with you and the girls?"

"Then," he said, "we'll both go. I have thought of this, but was afraid you would not leave all your people here."

Then they both declared it was the only thing to do, and wondered they had not thought of it from the first; and both of them became so full of the project that the long journey brightened before them as the most desirable thing on earth, and the girls, who had dreaded the lonely voyage, now looked forward to it with delight.

And then Mr. and Mrs. Vernon were bitten with a restless desire to start off on their travels also. Fabian would not be sent abroad for some months, Harold and Arthur could be left in Mrs. Fabian's charge, with the grandmother as overseer. There was no reason why they should not go and see George ordained priest at Perth, where afterward the two marriages were to take place. And thus not only did the disruption of home lose its bitterness with the Marleons, but Mr. Vernon knew that no better plan could be devised for Amy's benefit.

She opened the piano that evening for the first time since *Will's death*; and though she played something very low and pathetic, it

was the beginning in the right direction. Toby flew into the room as he heard the sound, and demanded his old favorites; and after a vain attempt to excuse herself, she struck up with the old ardor. Her face was brighter that night than it had been for many a day. The thought of change and travel, and George at the end, was already working a cure. "It would be like renewing her youth," she said, "to try a long voyage again."

It is given to the historian to see of his characters what he cannot see of himself. He knows them from the beginning to the future—that future which is blank to everyone beside. He knows their motives and their unspoken thoughts. But more than this, he can pierce the perspective of years, and see their deeds on the as yet unblotted records of many far-reaching to-morrows.

To Cotley Grammar School come Vernons from Australia and India, and make their home, as did their fathers before them, under their grandmother's roof. Fabian's boys press nearest their youngest uncle in the school's roll of fame. Another generation will find Harold installed as head-master; a most scholarly head-master with a special kindness for wayward children. And in the large house in Great Street, a bright brass plate will show that Dr. Arthur Vernon reigns worthily where his great-grandfather once flourished. There is no fear that the time-honored name will cease in Cotley for many generations. On Dalrymple's last visit to England, he and his wife—once Adela Meredith—brought two fair little baby girls to leave in Amy's special charge. Only her husband knows the joy those fragile baby girls brought to her heart. It seemed to her as if time had restored the dead.

In the church in far-off Wattibuldi is a stained-glass window to the name and fame of William Vernon, placed there by the two regiments to which he had belonged, with the appropriate motto belonging to the dragoons—"Ready." The Indian sunlight streams through it in blue and vermillion, in crimson and purple and gold, flecking the white marble pillars with gorgeous color; while over his distant resting-place, in sight of the everlasting snows, the broken marble column, sent out from home, is hung with ever blooming flowers; and the stillness of the hills is often stirred by the happy voices of children, who come with their *mothers* to keep the shrubs from running riot over the grave. "Those the gods love die young," May said once. But she never allows she ever loved him as she loves her husband, Jim Leigh.

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